

Lifting the Veil of Silence: A Mi Shebeirach for Those Struggling with Mental Illnesses¹

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*Mi Shebeirach avoteinu m'kor hab'racha l'imoteinu.
May the Source of strength who blessed the ones before us
Help us find the courage to make our lives a blessing.
And let us say, Amen.*

*Mi shebeirach imoteinu m'kor hab'racha lavoteinu.
Bless those in need of healing with refuah sh'lemah
The renewal of body, the renewal of spirit.
And let us say, Amen.²*

Amen. Thank you. Thank you all for saying those names aloud and singing for healing.³ I am overwhelmed by the sense of support that exists in this congregation. You all have helped make Congregation Or Ami a safe place in which to seek healing.

Once, not too long ago, the names of ill people would be mentioned only in a whisper, and sometimes only to the doctor or rabbi. Neil Simon's play Brighton Beach Memoirs has a scene of a family sitting around a table. Mom leans over to her sister and says, "Did you hear about Sophie?" She has [whispered] "cancer." Words like cancer and AIDS, heart disease and addiction, caused fear of contamination; so we whispered the names of those affected. A wall of silence surrounded them.

Today by talking aloud about these conditions, by praying for those who are struggling, we help them heal, and we heal ourselves too. When we prepared to sing the Mi Shebeirach prayer, I tried to really hear the names mentioned. I heard names of adults who I know are suffering from cancer and leukemia; who are recovering from an operation or the flu; the names of kids struggling with physical disabilities; the names of grandparents whose bodies are slowing down. I heard the names of families trying to heal after the death of a loved one and names of young mothers still healing after miscarriages and still births.

I felt hopeful hearing all these names, because I know how powerful this prayer is to those who are sick and those who care about and for them. I know our prayers bring comfort and strength and healing for those in need.

But I also felt sad as I thought about people in need of healing whose names might not have been said aloud. I did not hear the names of people I know are battling depression. Did we mention the people struggling with panic attacks or dealing with autism and Asperger's syndrome? What about the children living with pervasive developmental disorders? And the teens with the eating disorders? And the adults with bipolar affective disorder, or with Alzheimer's or with dementia? Some people might have mentioned those names aloud. But sadly others did not. Perhaps they did not feel safe, because there is still such a stigma attached to those struggling with emotional or mental illness.

I can see from your faces that this discussion may make some of us uncomfortable. But Yom Kippur is a time to tackle difficult issues, those we would rather not talk about, that we want to brush under the table.⁴

I am proud that Congregation Or Ami has embraced the Jewish healing movement.⁵ We have created a bond of trust, lifting the veil of silence surrounding physical illness. Can we trust each other enough to lift the veil surrounding mental illness?

Mental illness is pervasive. According to the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, 23% of American adults (ages 18 and older) suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year.⁶ 23%. Another statistic estimates that 17.4 million Americans suffer from clinical depression every year. One in every seven. With about 850 people in this room this morning, statistically, therefore, approximately 196 people here know someone who has been clinically depressed. Statistically, some form of mental illness affects at least 300 families represented today. And many are afraid to talk about it.

The New York Times recently reported that the incidence of autism is drastically rising here in California. Time Magazine reported that men suffer in great numbers from depression, but tend not to seek help, so the numbers who suffer may be even higher.⁷

Mental illness, like any illness, is a medical condition. This situation is as old as the Talmud and even strikes our scholars. There is a Talmudic story about Rabbi Eleazar.⁸

The room was dark. Rabbi Eleazar was still in bed, turned toward the wall. He could not bring himself to look toward the window at life and light. Rabbi Yochanan entered the room, looked down through the darkness at his friend, pulled up a chair and sat down. Rabbi Yochanan prepared to sit in this heavy silence for a long time. He began to roll up his sleeve. His face reflected the darkness. But his hands and arms seemed to brighten the room with their own light. Rabbi Eleazar turned from the wall to face his friend.

Yochanan asked: “Why are you crying?” Rabbi Eleazar was silent for another moment. Then he blinked at the brightness of Yochanan’s white shirt. His gentle hands. The pale skin of his forearms. Eleazar finally spoke. “I weep because all light fades into darkness. Because all beauty eventually rots.” After some time Rabbi Yochanan replied: “Yes, ultimately, everything dies. So perhaps, you have reason to weep.” They wept in darkness together.

Yochanan asked: “Does darkness comfort you?” Slowly, Eleazar shook his head. “Maybe it did in the beginning, but it can’t protect me from my thoughts.” Yochanan asked: “And the silence? Is it comforting?” “No.” “And being alone?” Eleazar looked into his friend’s eyes. “No, 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 light and life touch him. He felt strength and warmth reach him. His friend Yochanan raised him out of his bed and helped him to the door.

For Eleazar, the darkness comes and goes. It debilitates him, consumes him. Doctor friends have told me that Eleazar seems to struggle with depression. But the Talmudic rabbis did not use words like “depression” or “mental illness.” Maybe it’s better that way. Without technical labels to alarm us, we can listen with open minds. We hear the story and our hearts break.

If Eleazar had been labeled as a depressive, would we have been able to forgive him for staying in bed all day? If the setting of the story had been the psychiatric ward of a local hospital – say UCLA’s Neuropsychological Institute (NPI) – would we have listened with the same openness? Had the story been about our parents or children or ourselves, would we have mentioned the names aloud at the Mi Shebeirach prayer?⁹

I ask these questions because Congregation Or Ami is committed to lifting the veil of silence, to reaching out and shining the light of caring and healing for those in need. Because of our Henaynu Caring Community Committee, physical illness is no longer whispered about, addiction is talked about and even death is confronted openly and honestly.¹⁰ But when we hear about people with mental illness, sometimes we are still silent. Yet there are people hiding in darkness who still seek our light.

I know a man I’ll call Steve, not a member of our community. Steve explains it this way: “I’ve recently been hospitalized for depression and attempts to harm myself, and I have family members who still do not realize that I have a real medical problem. They say things like “everyone gets depressed,” just “think happy thoughts” and “snap out of it.” They suggest I should pretend not to have depression. It was hard enough to convince myself that I was depressed. Now I have to struggle against their disbelief too?” So Steve must suffer alone.¹¹ Can’t we help lift up the veil for him?

As I look around I can even see that some of you are very uncomfortable with the topic. It is painful. Why all this attention to mental illness? We all have contact with people who are dealing with it... family, friends, relatives of friends. Because people we care about, and their families, are suffering terrible anguish. Alone. Still, few would ever consider mentioning the names aloud during the Mi Shebeirach prayer. Sufferers of mental illness are afraid to be judged. They don’t want to be told: “Cheer up. You take yourself and life too seriously. Exercise and you’ll feel better.” Members of their families worry about being blamed, silenced or ignored. If both of Eleazar’s legs were broken, would his friend have demanded he try to get out of bed? If his friend was bleeding, do you think Yochanan would have asked: why are you crying?

Congregation Or Ami has always tried to help others. Let us continue that trend. We need to share God’s healing: If you know someone that is in anguish, reach out. If they ask for privacy, give them their space. But make sure to try again later. If someone in your family is in need, know that our community is blessed with skilled psychiatrists and therapists, doctors and nurses, who can assist.

Imagine yourself as a healer: Become part of the Jewish healing movement’s efforts to talk to our state and national representatives and urge our health insurance companies to offer greater coverage for and greater privacy to those in suffering with mental illness. It’s not political; it is *refuah*, healing.¹²

When Moses’ sister Miriam was sick with a serious illness, Moses prayed to God. *El na r’fa na la*, he said. “Please, O God, heal her please.”¹³ And Moses spoke Miriam’s name aloud. Let prayer be a source of healing and support. Let your rabbi listen and help you find help. And next time we pray the Mi Shebeirach prayer, mention the names of loved ones who are struggling with mental illness. Together, we can lift higher the veil of silence. Together we can bring healing.

Ken yehi ratzon. May it be God’s will.

¹ I thank Lisa Kodmur, Assistant Director, and Dr. William Cutter, Director, of the Kalsman Institute on Judaism and Health, and Rabbi Richard Address of the UAHC’s Department of Family Concerns, for their support supportive in the preparation of this sermon. I am indebted to the wisdom of Rabbi Susan Lippe and her sermon A

Jewish Response to Mental Illness (June 2002). My colleague Rabbi Ron Stern read and commented upon successive drafts and provided important insights into how to address this sensitive subject with congregants. Finally, my wife Michelle November, with her Master's degree in Social Work from Columbia University, helped refine and edit this sermon so that its message would not be lost due to excessive length or rabbi-speak.

² *Mi Shebeirach*, by Deborah Lynn Friedman. Congregation Or Ami, like many synagogues around the country, sings this Mi Shebeirach prayer during every service. This prayer is preceded by a D'var Refuah, a short lesson or discussion about healing, in which we talk – with permission – about members of our congregation who are struggling with illness or facing death. Referencing Jewish texts or prayers on healing and openly talking about the reality of illness creates a community of openness which lifts the veil of silence surrounding illness and death.

³ At Congregation Or Ami we ask our congregants to mention names aloud as well as their relationship to the one named. We remind them to speak loudly, for there is no shame in illness, and because we want to be able to offer support to those in need of healing. Members of our Henaynu Caring Community Committee take note of those mentioned and follow up with calls and support in the week following.

⁴ We are taught that the role of the rabbi is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable.

⁵ Two organizations stand at the forefront of the Jewish Healing Movement. The National Center for Jewish Healing, a Jewish Health, Healing and Recovery Program of the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services (850 Seventh Ave., Suite 1201, New York, NY 10019, (212) 399-2320, www.jbfcs.org) serves as a resource for Jewish Healing Centers throughout the country. The Reform Jewish Movement's Kalsman Institute on Judaism and Health (Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 3077 University Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90007-3796, 213-749-3424, kalsman@huc.edu) serves as an educational and training center for HUC-JIR students and alumni and for all people committed to spirituality and healing. The Kalsman Institute provides a meeting ground of dialogue, interpretation and progressive practice, and embodies the deepest values of Judaism and the Reform Movement. I currently serve as a partner of the Kalsman Institute.

⁶ National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) is a nonprofit, grassroots, self-help, support and advocacy organization of consumers, families, and friends of people with severe mental illnesses. Founded in 1979, NAMI today works to achieve equitable services and treatment for more than 15 million Americans living with severe mental illnesses and their families. Hundreds of thousands of volunteers participate in more than one thousand local affiliates and fifty state organizations to provide education and support, combat stigma, support increased funding for research, and advocate for adequate health insurance, housing, rehabilitation, and jobs for people with mental illnesses and their families. Contact the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, Colonial Place Three, 2107 Wilson Blvd., Suite 300, Arlington, VA 22201-3042, (703) 524-7600, www.nami.org.

⁷ *Real Men Get the Blues*, by Jeffrey Kluger (Sept. 22, 2003) in *Time Magazine*. Kluger writes that depression is twice as common among women as men, but it may be the guys who suffer most. *Autism Diagnoses Double In California* by Sandra Blakeslee, in *New York Times* (May 14, 2003).

⁸ Babylonian Talmud, Brachot 5b. Adapted from a version told by Rabbi Susan Lippe in her sermon, *A Jewish Response to Mental Illness*.

⁹ These important questions were first articulated by Rabbi Susan Lippe in her sermon *A Jewish Response to Mental Illness*.

¹⁰ Our Henaynu (“We are here”) Caring Community Committee makes calls of support, provides meals for families after an illness, and delivers food for shiva meals. Often, Henaynu has called our congregants in need even before the rabbi is aware of a situation.

¹¹ I met Steve (not his real name) through the NAMI website, www.nami.org.

¹² The Reform Jewish movement has gone on record in support of expanding care for those with mental illnesses. The Union of American Hebrew Congregations, at its 66th General Assembly in December 2001 in Boston, Massachusetts, passed a resolution, “Establishing A Comprehensive System of Care For Persons with Mental Illnesses.” The Central Conference of American Rabbis, at its 108th Annual Convention in June, 1997 passed a resolution, “Caring for Those with Mental Illnesses.” The UAHC recently published *CARING for the SOUL, R'fuat HaNefesh: A Mental Health Resource and Study Guide*, edited by Rabbi Richard Address. *Caring for the Soul: R'fuat HaNefesh* was created as a response to the need to raise awareness of and reduce the stigma within congregations regarding individuals and families who are dealing with mental health issues.

¹³ Numbers 12.