



Yom Kippur Sermon

A man went to see his physician because he wasn't feeling well. "Doctor," he said, "I am suffering from a dark and unshakable depression. Nothing I do gives me any relief. I am overwhelmed with pain and most days, I can't even make it out of bed. Doctor, what should I do?" The doctor thought for a moment then offered the following treatment plan. "This is what you need to do. Tonight, go to the theatre where the Great Carlini is performing. He is the funniest man in the world and everybody who sees him finds him hysterical. By all means, go see Carlini. He is guaranteed to make you laugh and drive away your depression." Upon hearing these words, the man burst into tears and sobbed uncontrollably. "But doctor," he said, "I am Carlini."

This past summer, when Robin Williams took his own life, our very own Carlini left this world. He could make us laugh like no other, no matter how dark or difficult our world became. And he wasn't just a brilliant and creative and hysterically funny man, he was extraordinarily generous and kind as well. And he was our neighbor, for us he was a local person as well as a world famous celebrity. But Robin Williams also suffered from intractable depression and anxiety, and from Parkinson's as well. These diseases darkened his life despite the joy and light he brought into ours', and his tragic death left us bereft. While nothing can erase the horrible tragedy of Robin Williams' death, something remarkable emerged in its aftermath.

Immediately upon hearing the news of Robin Williams' suicide, people began to speak about depression and mental illness. Articles blanketed the newspapers and internet as so many shared their own experiences with the disease. Mental health professionals as well appeared on news programs and talk shows and for a few days, mental illness caught the attention of our nation. For the first time, so many people spoke openly about mental illness, which is so devastating and so widespread, yet which is often hidden behind a veil of silence and despair and shame. And for a time that shroud began to lift and reveal the very real impact it has on so many people and the critical need for more awareness and support.

Tonight, on this holiest night of the year, I am speaking about mental illness because for over 20 years as your rabbi, I have seen just how many lives it affects. I have seen parents desperately worried about their depressed teens, I have seen adults 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 think of you every time I drive over the bridge and pray that no other family has to face the devastation nor have to find the strength that you have. On Rosh Hashanah, we asked both here and at the sanctuary service, for people to write down their personal viduis, our confessions or aspirations for growth and change for the year. We'll be reading some of them during services tomorrow, but I have brought a few with me tonight. In fact, I haven't been able to put them down since I first read them one week ago. One reads, "(I live in constant mental and emotional pain and I don't know what to do," and another, "Please release me from constant thoughts of suicide." Tonight I am speaking because of you, because of your bravery in naming your pain and in facing it every day. And I am speaking about mental illness for all you who love someone whose lives are darkened by it. I am speaking because I don't believe that anyone should have to suffer



alone or in silence, afraid to reveal their truth or their pain.

As much mental illness as I have seen in this holy community over the years, this issue is also very personal for me. You see, two years ago, my stepfather Dallas committed suicide. He had suffered from relentless depression and addiction for decades. Despite his pain, he shared only joy and humor and love with our sons and with all of his adoring grandchildren. But we knew how much he struggled and the burden he felt, and ultimately, his depression was so bad that it overtook him. We miss him terribly and think about him every day. The day after Robin Williams died, my mother posted the following words to her Facebook page. It was the first time in the two years since Dallas' death that she acknowledged his suicide publicly. "My husband committed suicide two years ago," she said. "We all grieve when someone dies. Suicide is different because it is unexpected, and totally devastating to family and loved ones. I say this now because of the very sad death of Robin Williams. For those who are depressed and unable to cope with your lives, who are unable to think of yourselves as part of this world any longer...please seek help. Write to me if you like. Today the world mourns Robin Williams. Your family would be more devastated than that world."

Judaism has always understood that physical and mental illness are equally deserving of healing, and we are all a key to that healing. We need to make it safer for more people to come out

from behind the shadows and find the support and care they need to continue to go on with their lives, both those living with mental illness and their family and friends who care for them. We need to start talking more openly about the "secret" illness that nobody wants to talk about. It wasn't so long ago that people only spoke in whispers about cancer. And while today we can speak about cancer and other diseases of the body freely, mental illness still carries with it a stigma and prejudice that prevents so many from seeking the help we need. But Judaism understands that emotional and spiritual pain are as real and serious as that of the body. Just look at the Mi

Shebeirach prayer, the prayer for healing we recite every Shabbat and holiday: refuat he-nefesh uh-refuat ha goof, we pray for healing of spirit, the soul, and healing of the body. And so many of us are in need of healing for both.

If Robin Williams' tragic death taught us anything, it is that mental illness can affect anybody; it does not discriminate. And I know as I look around this holy sanctuary tonight, that it touches so many of us and our loved ones. Look around at the people sitting by our sides. One in four adults experiences mental illness in a given year, approximately 61.5 million Americans. And about 20 percent of youth aged 13 to 18 experience severe mental disorders in a given year. Because of them; because of the people sitting by our sides, we cannot keep silent. So pervasive is mental illness that it is the leading cause of disability in America, costing an estimated \$193.2 billion in lost earnings each year. In fact, by 2030, depression will outpace cancer, stroke, war and accidents as the world's leading cause of disability and death. And tragically, too many people take their own lives as a result of severe depression. On August 11th alone, the very day Robin Williams committed suicide, 108 other people did as well. They too left behind children, parents, and families who mourn their death and suffer in their absence. Because of them, we cannot keep silent.

Every year, more people die from suicide than automobile accidents, and twice as many than from homicide. Because of the millions and millions who suffer from mental illness, we simply cannot keep silent anymore. And, while experts tell us that 90% of those who take their own lives suffer from mental illness, most people, a full 70-90% who do receive the correct treatment find significant relief from their symptoms and pain. For them, for all of those who heal and go on to live rich and meaningful lives, we cannot remain silent.

Yet despite all of this, people who live with mental illness continue to feel ostracized, marginalized, and certainly, 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," she asks, "that we can laud cancer survivors for how hard they've fought, but we don't think about mental illness the same way?" Another man living with bipolar disorder admitted, "I told my friend about my mental illness and I never heard from her again." But, as Robin Williams 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." And despite the medical advances in treating mental illness, so many misperceptions still exist. We all need to be clear, mental illness is not a moral failing, it is not a weakness or a character flaw. In fact, a national mental health organization reinforced this fact when they affixed a very large sign to an Upper West Side building in Manhattan that read, "Depression is a failure of chemistry, not character." They could have written a long list of mental illnesses, but due to lack of space, couldn't include them all! A local psychologist would direct her patients to read the sign every time they left her office.

For centuries, Judaism has understood depression to be a part of life. From Moses, who cried out to God, "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," to King Saul who was overcome by a ruach ra'ah, an "bad spirit" or what we may see as bipolar illness today, our biblical ancestors faced horrific darkness. Rabbi Elliot Kukla of the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center explains that, "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." And while sometimes mental illness is chronic, other times it is situational; postpartum depression or midlife depression affect many of us, as does depression triggered by mourning or grief. And it is vital to seek help and support for these as well.

Even the Talmud, written 1,500 years ago, discusses depression and how best to offer support. In Berakhot, we read the story of Rabbi Eleazar who is ill, suffering from deep despair. When his friend, Rabbi Yochanan, visits him, he finds Eleazar alone in a darkened room, facing the wall.

He cannot bear to see the light; even the light from Yochanan's arm is too bright for his eyes and his soul. When Yochanan sees that his friend is 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 sat down with his friend and wept



alongside him. After a while Yochanan asked, "Does darkness comfort you? Do you want these sufferings?" "No," Yochanan says. "Then give me your hand," replies Yochanan, and he lifts Rabbi Eleazar up from his bed and out of his darkened room. Sometimes, the Talmud teaches us, the best way to help people who suffer is to just be present with them and accompany them in their darkness and into the light of day. Sometimes, the Talmud teaches us, the best way to help people how suffer is not to talk them out of their pain or tell them they will get better soon; it is to just be present with them and accompany them in their darkness.

But that is often so hard to do. In our society, we are so accustomed to avoiding darkness, with nightlights for our children to ward away monsters and televisions blaring at night to fill the silence, that we forget that darkness is not only inevitable, but that 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 God. And 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. A woman from our community who suffered from severe depression described her experience; "Staying with the pain is really a universal requirement for healing. And through my whole experience, I just wanted it to end, but this type of journey cannot be rushed." Patience and belief in self were instrumental to her healing. "It was vitally important," she said, "that every single day I pushed myself to get out of bed, get dressed, and do something.

Even if it was just to buy milk. I needed to keep moving in order to travel the path of the healed, the warrior, the survivor." This brave woman walked through the valley of the shadow of death every day for five years and it was there, with tremendous support from her family and friends, along with exceptional medical care, that she found healing and self-compassion and real acceptance for the first time in her life.

This woman was admittedly very fortunate; she had a supportive and devoted family and friends who stood by her side, and she had access to medical care, both of which enabled her to heal and emerge stronger. But many who live with mental illness lack these vital supports, and so often, health insurance coverage is limited for mental health care. This is where we all come in; there is so much that we can do to advocate, to strengthen the safety net, and to be truly supportive for those living with mental illness. I invite you to join me for a Mental Health Think Tank on October 23rd, where we will continue the conversation about mental illness in our community and beyond. Any of you who suffer from mental illness or love someone who does, those of you who are mental health professionals, and anyone who believes as I do that we can do a better job as a community of caring for those who live with mental illness, let's join together. I want for Congregation Rodef Sholom to truly be a safe place for all people to be themselves and reveal themselves, and to find the support they need. We simply cannot allow the conversation to end here.

Yet tonight, on this holy night of introspection, the conversation actually begins inside of each of us. As we search our souls, we also examine our own views and prejudices about mental illness. What words do we use? How might we perpetuate harmful stigmas when we loosely use words like "wacko" or say that someone is acting "crazy?" And what might it sound like when we casually say, "That was so bad I wanted to shoot myself," or "I wanted to jump off the bridge?" What must it feel like to people for whom the bridge has become a nightmare?

I want to speak directly for a moment to those of you who wrote the cards I read earlier and to those of you who struggle with mental illness of 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 that you are not alone. We, your clergy and your community, are here for you.

We will 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. And we can also help you find the resources you need, like the cards with emergency support numbers at the sanctuary doors, which are also listed on our website. Continue to be brave and strong, and may this year, help you to find compassion and contentment. And for those of you whose loved ones suffer from mental illness -- mothers and fathers and children and siblings and partners your heart is so full with of both love and pain. Tonight, as I stand before you, I stand in awe of you and all that you carry every day. May God continue to strengthen you and lift you as you care for the ones you love.

May the earth beneath your feet hold you and nourish you and bring you sustenance. And lastly, 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 to find life again, and remind us that we belong in this world, and that we are worthy of love and kindness. May God bless you with peace and fulfillment.

I had planned on closing tonight with a Robin Williams joke, but I couldn't find one that was appropriate for Yom Kippur. Instead, I close with this blessing for us all:

On this New Year, Help us God,

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 to heal souls With laughter and joy.

Keep our hearts open and loving, And bless us with goodness, Compassion,

And peace.

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