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Yom Kippur morning

“Choose Life”: A Group Project

“You stand this day, all of you, before the Eternal your God. ... Life and death I place before you, blessing and curse. Choose life that you may live” (Deut. 29:9, 30:19).

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The balance of life and death is felt on Yom Kippur as on no other day. For on Yom Kippur as on no other day, we who are alive rehearse for our deaths. The symbols and rituals of Yom Kippur lift us body and soul out of the ordinary flow of time, giving us a glimpse of the ultimate end that awaits each of us.

One such symbol is our clothing. It is traditional to wear white on Yom Kippur to represent the purity for which we pray. Jews also wear white at their weddings; and then, finally, we are buried in a plain white shroud. We wear today what we will wear when we are dead.

At Kol Nidre, wearing our metaphorical funeral mantles, we remove the Torah scrolls from the ark. The Hebrew word for the ark is *aron* – and this is also the Hebrew word for coffin. As we remove the Tree of Life from the *aron*, we stand as if peering into our own grave.

And on Yom Kippur, it is traditional to fast and to refrain from sexual intercourse. These practices distance us from the forces that sustain and create life, calling us to reckon with our own mortality.

We stand on Yom Kippur as if on the edge of a cliff, and we peer into the depths beyond. We imagine what hides in the shadows; we listen for sounds emerging from below; and we wonder at the powers that created the darkness in the first place. By invoking and embodying death, we confront the most fundamental questions of what it means to be human.

And then, following our contemplation and reflection, we step back from the cliff. We refocus our attention on the world we know. We walk away from Yom Kippur changed, perhaps, but intact. The fast ends, the shroud comes off, and life resumes.

“Choose life that you may live.”

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But for some of us, it's not so easy. There are some of us for whom Yom Kippur may feel far more real than a rehearsal, for whom the commandment to "choose life" is no easy task.

I speak in particular of those in our holy community who struggle with the afflictions of depression and mental illness. One out of every fifteen American adults lives with major depression,¹ and nearly one in five live with identifiable mental illness.² And many of these men and women know too well and too often the emptiness we encounter on Yom Kippur.

In the fog of depression or other forms of mental illness, it may be difficult to hear the commandment pronounced so plainly in our Torah reading. It is not always easy to "choose life." But even in the grip of emotional paralysis or spiritual anguish, we can turn to our tradition for both wisdom and comfort.

Perhaps our greatest teacher about Judaism and depression is Rebbe Nahman of Bratslav. Nahman was born in 1772 in Medzhibozh (in present-day Ukraine). His great-grandfather was the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism. Wondrous stories about the Ba'al Shem Tov inspired Jews across Eastern Europe to embrace story and song in a new way, forever changing the Jewish world. Rebbe Nahman became one of his most prominent spiritual heirs, making unsurpassed contributions to Jewish mysticism and prayer.

But while Nahman is rightly remembered for his unbridled, passionate, and joyous prayer, he also suffered from persistent depression. As he once confessed to his closest friend, "Why do I have to struggle so hard in everything I do – as though I were giving my life for it?"³ Nahman's life was an unending contest between yearning for joy and battling against despair. He taught, "The main thing is that one must struggle with all one's strength to be joyous always. It is the nature of [humankind] to be drawn into melancholy and sadness because of the things that happen; every [person] is filled with sorrows."⁴ His writings and the memories of his closest friends confirm that Nahman spent his life trying to overcome emotional anguish.

For Nahman, as for many people today, depression surged and receded like waves against the shore. His biographer, Arthur Green, notes that "moments of extreme and seemingly arrogant self-confidence continued to alternate, in adulthood as

¹ <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/prevalence/major-depression-among-adults.shtml>

² <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/prevalence/any-mental-illness-ami-among-adults.shtml>

³ Quoted in Arthur Green's *Tormented Master*, p. 48

⁴ *Likkutei Mohoran*, II:24. Quoted in Arthur Green's *Tormented Master* p. 164.

in adolescence, with moments of the most bleak and overwhelming depression.”⁵ During periods of relative calm, Nahman endured an unshakable yet manageable sadness. During periods of depression, however, Nahman’s condition changed. He sensed the chilling tendrils of despair encroaching on his love of life, and he sought help.

Because Nahman knew that sadness and despair are not the same. Sadness opened his soul and taught him and his followers that vulnerability is essential to clinging to God. “A broken heart is precious in God’s eyes” he wrote.⁶ Despair, on the other hand, is dangerous. “*Gevalt!*” he once exclaimed. “Do not despair!” And witnesses attest, “He said the[se] words with such strength and wondrous depth that he taught everyone, for all generations, that [we] should never despair...”⁷ Nahman could tolerate sadness, but he knew the danger of hopelessness.

Despair can draw us down into the chasm of desperation, where we may believe in the seductive mirage that there is no hope. But in Judaism, Nahman teaches, hope is no illusion. Even in the midst of depression, there is always hope.

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Of course, hope itself is not a cure, but hope can lead to treatment that *can* help. Therapy can help. Medicine can help. Even some lifestyle changes can help. None of these treatments comes with a guarantee, but time and again, they have been shown to be helpful to many people who struggle with mental illness.

If you feel like you’re struggling with depression or any other mental illness, seek treatment. Speak to your primary care physician for a referral. Or contact your insurance company to see what mental health providers are in-network. Or reach out to Jewish Family Services, which can help you determine the right path for you. One way or another, find the treatment you need, the treatment you deserve.

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Mental illness, like many other chronic conditions, strikes unevenly, unpredictably, and sometimes irreversibly. Treatments can help, some more than others – but even during treatment, those who struggle with mental illness often feel set apart from the rest of society.

This is why, our Torah teaches us, we cannot expect to “choose life” alone. In the same breath, God also reminds us:

⁵ *Tormented Master* p. 48.

⁶ *Likkutei Etzot*, Hitbodedut, #23, cited in Days of Awe remarks prepared by Rabbi Jan Uhrbach 2009.

⁷ Quoted in Arthur Green’s *Tormented Master* p. 265.

“You stand this day, all of you, before the Eternal your God.”

It’s no coincidence that we go through Yom Kippur as a group. It’s not by accident that we are called to face death at the time when more Jews come together than at any other point during the year. No, our being here together, today, as a community, is absolutely essential to what it means to “choose life.”

The Torah calls those who struggle with mental illness to look around and see those who are closest to you, both physically and emotionally. See your friends and family; see your fellow Jews. We are all here for you. Rabbi Nemitoff and I are here for you. When the curses in life cloud out the blessings, when you lack the strength to step away from the edge over which we peer at this solemn time, turn to one of us. Let us choose life together.

To those who have witnessed loved ones suffering from mental illness, the Torah calls you to seek support in expressing your pain. If a loved one has committed suicide, know that it’s not your fault. For you, choosing life means finding a way to live with the pain, and there are people who care about you who can help.

And the Torah exhorts all of us, whether or not we struggle with mental illness, to support others who do. There is much that we can do to help our loved ones choose life even in their darkest hour.

For instance, we may face the dread of suspecting that a loved one might harm him- or herself or, God forbid, attempt suicide. There is a false belief that talking about these fears can make them real when in fact, the opposite is true. Research demonstrates that talking about suicide openly is not only safe, but helpful. Say plainly to your loved one: “I’m concerned about you. Are you thinking about hurting yourself?” If the answer is yes, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline to get guidance about what to do next. The number is 800-273-TALK, 800-273-8255.⁸

Of course, most people struggling with depression or other mental illnesses don’t attempt suicide. Still, our heart breaks for the pain they endure. We can help them to choose life by being partners in treatment. We can accompany our loved ones to the doctor or to Jewish Family Services. We can educate ourselves on the conditions that afflict our friends and family members, and we can talk out loud about those conditions just like we might talk about other chronic illnesses. Dispelling the stigma around mental illness is one major step we can take in helping to alleviate its effects.

⁸ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joanne-l-harpel-mphil-jd/suicide_b_5902540.html

One concrete step each of us can take is to become familiar with where to go for help. I've mentioned the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline and Jewish Family Services. More details and contact information for both of these free services will be distributed to everyone as we leave services this morning. Please take this information home, add the Lifeline to your cell phone contacts, and have a frank conversation with your loved ones. Perhaps this conversation can uncover a hope long forgotten, reviving the will to choose life and live.

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"Life and death I place before you."

"You stand here today, all of you."

"Choose life that you may live."

These are the refrains of Yom Kippur, the day on which we recite:

וַיִּמְנָה תְּקֵף קִדְשֵׁת הַיּוֹם כִּי הוּא נוֹרָא וְאֵיִם.

"Let us proclaim the sacredness of this day, for it is awesome and full of dread."

Our spiritual journey on Yom Kippur brings us metaphorically to the brink of death. This is a holy pilgrimage to the edge of time, designed to inspire humility, reflection, and yes, fear. We make ourselves vulnerable to the reality that our mortal understanding of the universe pales before the magnitude of what lies beyond our sight. Through meditation and prayer, through song and silence, we bring meaning to our sadness, fortifying our souls for the moment when we will return the Tree of Life back into the *aron*, awaken to the call of the shofar, break our fasts, and return to our lives and to the pursuit of life.

But here and now, in our shared frailty, we arouse our sympathy for those who find themselves in this state more than one day a year.

Pushed to the spiritual limit, we reach out for support. On this Yom Kippur, let us pray that our hands may find the hands of others we love and others who need our love. And let us all be held up by the embrace of the Holy One of Blessing, who implants within us the spark of life and, today and forever, the seed of hope.

G'mar chatimah tovah, may each of us be inscribed for blessing in the Book of Life.