

" M E N T A L H E A L T H "

Erev Yom Kippur 5771 – Friday, September 18, 2010

Congregation B'nai Jehudah – Overland Park, Kansas

Sermon by Rabbi Arthur P. Nemitoff

Abe didn't want to go. How could he? But, then again, could he really say no? After all, he had heard the voice. Something inside compelled him to listen to it. His wife was ambivalent. All that way just to say thanks? But she knew her husband. Whenever he got something into his thick skull, he just wouldn't be turned back. Sometimes it felt as if she didn't even have a voice. Then again, her husband often heard voices that clearly overshadowed hers...and that was – at times – problematic. In the past, she had pleaded. She had yelled. She had cajoled. She had cried. Now, she just didn't know what else to do...so she said nothing.

Abe had, indeed, made up his mind. And off he went...with his son, with a couple of friends...three days they traveled. Lousy food. Awful accommodations. No one felt like speaking. Three days of silence...horrible.

Finally, they got there. Abe and his son went to say thanks. The others stayed behind. Up to then, it was just a normal trip. It's what happened afterwards that folks still talk about.

Abe was hearing voices again. And whenever he did...well, he really wasn't himself. People who knew Abe kind of knew something was wrong. Most never talked about it. We just don't bring those things up in polite company. Especially after that first instance. Since there, there were other moments. He didn't seem like the old Abe anymore.

This time was a bit different. It was a loud voice, he said. He heard God, he said. He heard God tell him to kill his son. The voice was so strong. Abe felt compelled even to murder his son if the voice told him.

Needless to say, his son thought differently about all this. "Humor the old man," he thought. "Just play along. Help him through the delusions and

voices." So, he set himself up as the soon-to-be murdered son, never believing that his father would do it.

Thank God, he didn't do it. Whether he snapped out of it at the last minute or – as he claimed – the voice told him not to...that, too, has been debated. But he didn't. And eventually they all just went back home. And, as is usually the case, no one talked about it. It remained their family secret.

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A bizarre story, to be sure. But one well-known, for it is the Torah portion read last week, during Rosh Hashanah. It is, of course, Akedat Yitzchak, the Binding of Isaac.

It is no accident that this Genesis tale is told during these Yamim Noraim, these days of reflection. The Akedah presents itself as an "everyman" parable, one that permits us to see a piece of our own selves in this improbable story.

Like Abraham, we have many fears and concerns that overwhelm us. The challenges of our economy, health care, the environment, our safety in a world patently unsafe...these weigh on us...these make it hard at times even to breathe.

For most of us, it is a fine balancing act we perform – carefully weighing fears against hopes and reality...recognizing reality, focusing on hope, and limiting our fears.

But for others of us, it is not so easy. Rather, we are consumed by the fears that haunt us. They begin to take over our lives. And – whether literally or figuratively – we hear voices...just as Abraham did. The resulting behavior is as difficult to comprehend as is the literal text of the Akedah. What the text suggests is a tale of one who hears voices and is driven to behaviors seemingly

outside the realm of normal conduct. Perhaps Abraham suffered some form of mental illness.

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Mental illness? That’s what the rabbi wants to speak about on Yom Kippur? As one congregant challenged me when hearing about my Kol Nidrei topic, “Are you meshuggenah? How is that relevant to our lives today?”

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Yes, tonight I speak about mental illness. It is as devastating as hunger, homelessness, cancer...and an area of our lives we refuse to own.

Consider some statistics: An estimated 26% of Americans ages 18 and older – about one in four adults – suffer from diagnosable mental disorders in a given year.¹ A decade ago, the Surgeon General estimated that depression affects one in every five Americans.² Simply put, each one of us here knows someone who is struggling with mental health.

But why mental illness on Kol Nidrei? Because it is a matter of pikuach nefesh, saving lives, the highest mitzvah in Judaism. Some 33,000 people a year commit suicide.³ Between the ages of 15 and 35, suicide alternates between the second and third leading cause of death. Some 15% of all high school students in America have seriously considered, attempted to, or succeeded in committing suicide.⁴

As prevalent as this disease is, we refuse to confront it, to embrace those who struggle, or to offer our own stories as a means of creating shared experiences. How many women and men just last month participated in the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure? And many placed their own or their loved ones’ names on their race number? Breast cancer has come out of the closet, as have so many other illnesses. In so doing, we have made everyone more aware of the disease...we have made detection a priority...and the treatments are improving each and every year.

Why not the same with mental illness?

Part of the answer is stigma and shame. As Betty Jampel, writes, “When people are

excluded...because of perceived differences, they tend to disengage themselves... They isolate themselves and further become alienated and distanced from the very people and entities that can help them the most.”⁵

This is the sin of our community: al cheyt shechatanu – for the sin we have committed by shunning and mocking, by whispering and distancing when those around us suffer from an invisible – but nonetheless virulent – disease.

Perhaps as a community we over-emphasize achievement, success, conforming to an image of personal perfection. As a community, we have come late to the table in accepting those who are “other” – all those disabled, whether physically, mentally, or emotionally. We have not made them welcome.

If “we, as a Jewish community, [were] to embrace...[If we would] stop judging...and...lovingly accept...that we are all valuable in this world no matter... what others think about us”⁶ as we struggle with day-to-day living. Especially when family or friend sees the world as dark and frightening, our community should open up, embrace, and support however we can.

Tonight, I am thinking of one in our midst who committed suicide, John Uhlmann. John was a noble human being, who did extraordinary good both publicly and privately. But John had depression. And it was the disease that killed him, as surely as cancer or a tragic accident kills our loved ones. It is no different. Dozens of people approached me in the days following John’s death and each spoke of a loved one with depression. Many told tales that ended as John’s...with tragic and pain-filled ends for both victims and survivors. All spoke of the stigma and shame and isolation.

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Al cheyt shechatanu – for the sin we have committed by shunning and mocking, by whispering and distancing when those around us suffer from an invisible and virulent disease.

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A woman shared what the hardest thing was

about having a mental illness. It was the silence; when people discover that she suffers from mental illness... the conversation comes to an abrupt and awkward end. When asked what she would like them to say, she said: "I wish they would ask me questions about my illness. I wish they would show an interest to understand what I am going through. I wish they would give me the chance to share what I am experiencing, rather than let me suffer alone."⁷

It is the silence that hurts. It is the silence of being alone. Having been through my own period of depression, I can confirm how this feels. It is as though one is in a glass box, able to see out, able to see the beauty and wonder that life holds. Somehow, though, somehow... there is no sound, light, or touch beyond the walls of one's self-made prison. One is simply unable to break through.

Sometimes that prison **can** be broken out of. It takes effort on part on the individual, to be sure. But, it also take a community willing to understand, listen, support, and – most of all – to be present for that person.

An example is Noah Alper, who writes: "[As] a senior at the University of Wisconsin, I was incarcerated in a psychiatric hospital. The Vietnam War was raging... Fear of being drafted..., combined with old personal issues... sent me barreling over the edge. One day, while confined to the maximum-security ward, I peered out a small bathroom window through a dense security screen. As I looked out towards the leafy manicured grounds, I made a vow that someday I would rejoin "The Outside" and escape the imprisonment of my own thoughts."⁸

After getting out of the hospital and with support, help, and understanding from family and friends, Noah found his passion as an entrepreneur. Twenty-five years later, he retired as a multi-millionaire and was able to realize a dream of studying Torah in Jerusalem.

He describes an epiphanal moment, "Soon after our arrival [in Israel]... I was sitting in... a neighborhood synagogue, during Kabbalat Shabbat services. Surrounded by ecstatic singing, clapping, and faces filled with joy, my gaze was drawn outside through a window covered by

wrought-iron bars. I looked at the rustling leaves of a tree, and was emotionally transported back to the bathroom at the hospital. The promise I had made to myself half a lifetime ago was fulfilled. I had returned to the green verdant world to build a family, a career, and a future."

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A story is told of a young boy who was afraid of the dark. He soon realized that if he opened the door to his bedroom, his fears were gone. His mother commented, "By opening the door I see you let in the light," and he replied, "No, mother, by opening the door I let **out** the darkness."

May we be willing to open the door... not just for ourselves, but for those we surround with love. We may never be able to bring light. But we can surely help expel the darkness. Or to paraphrase the passage from Isaiah we will read tomorrow, "while our light may not shine in the darkness, with support and understanding, our night may become bright as noon."⁹ When it happens, our loved ones – we – may – with God's help – return to a green, verdant world.

¹ Kessler RC, Chiu WT, Demler O, Walters EE. Prevalence, severity, and comorbidity of twelve-month DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication (NCS-R). *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 2005 Jun;62(6):617-27 (<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/the-numbers-count-mental-disorders-in-america/index.shtml>)

² http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/mental-health/chapter2/sec2_1.html

³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS) [Online]. (2005). National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, CDC (producer). Available from URL: www.cdc.gov/ncipc/wisqars/default.htm.

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance—United States, 2007. *Surveillance Summaries*, June 6. MMWR 2008; 57(No. SS-4)

⁵ <http://njewishnews.com/njrn.com/010109/ItMentalIllness.html>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Rabbi Aron Moss; "Why Do I Suffer From Mental Illness?"

