

No Longer a Whisper - Silencing the Stigma of Mental Illness
High Holy Days 5776/2015

Newtown, Aurora, Tucson, Charleston. These cities will forevermore be associated with acts of gun violence. They are just a few examples of the mass shootings that have shocked us in the past few years. In addition to sparking important discussions about gun violence, these tragedies have also shed light on the prevalence of mental illness in our country. Now let me be clear: only 4% of violent crimes are committed by those with mental illnesses. The vast majority of people with mental illness do not commit violent crimes. However, these heinous acts have heightened our awareness about the need to help those who suffer from mental illness each day.

There was a period when our culture was afraid to even utter the word “cancer.” It used to be only spoken about in a whisper in order to avoid embarrassment and shame. Over time, though, we have come to better understand cancer, the treatments that exist, and the implications the disease has for us and those impacted by it.

Today, we speak about mental illness in a whisper. As was with cancer, the words “mental illness” evoke feelings of discomfort. Unfortunately, negative stereotypes have caused in discrimination, exclusion, and profound judgement. And, the mass murders that have plagued our country have helped fuel the stigmas associated with it. This stigma has taken the form of mistrust and fear against people with mental illness, so much so that some are unable to find jobs, maintain long-lasting and stable relationships, and are unable to live in decent housing. Feelings of isolation and being ostracized from their community can only intensify one’s emotional struggles. These stigmas often are

the culprits for why those with mental illness choose not to seek out the help that they may need.

During these Days of Awe, we stand before God and each other, opening our souls to the possibilities of becoming better human beings. We realize that we cannot be part of our life's journey alone, but what if there are those who feel that no one is willing to go on the journey with them? Mental illness, knowingly or unknowingly, significantly impacts all of us.

Most of us understand that it is treatable. We are aware that some are triggered by situational events. Others may be part of a genetic and neurological disposition. Many of us may have sought out medications such as Zoloft and Wellbutrin to help us to better manage our own anxiety and depression. Our government has even increased funding for the treatment of and education about mental illness.

Yet, there is still much to be done. Even at Temple Israel, whether we are aware of it or not, the stigma of mental illness is apparent. We have always aimed to create an inclusive environment here at Temple Israel. Sadly, though, there are individuals within our community who do not feel welcomed.

"Dena," as I will refer to her, came to my office in tears one afternoon. The only words that came out of her mouth were, "Why, rabbi, why? Why do I feel this way? I just want to feel better." No matter what I said, I knew that I would not be able to take away the pain Dena was feeling. After wiping the tears off her eyes, I responded: "I don't know why. But I do want you to feel better. I do want us to try and answer the questions that

may be easier to answer, such as, “How can we get you the help you need? What can be done so that you will feel supported?””

This was the first time in which anyone in our congregation responded Dena’s cries for help. When she shared her depression with friends she had made at Temple Israel, she felt that they abandoned her. Like the sound of blast of the shofar, we can answer the pleas of congregants like Dena. We can strive to be a community in which congregants feel included, feel as if they belong, and are reassured that they are part of our extended family.

I know about mental illness because it has been part of my family’s narrative. My great grandmother was institutionalized for schizophrenia. My grandmother was found dead, lying on the bathroom floor with pills in her hand.

I too have experienced my own struggles with depression and anxiety. It was my sophomore year in college. I had already found a home in my local college Hillel. Hillel was a place for me to develop a personal connection to Judaism, establish long-lasting relationships, and feel part of a community.

Yet, I was shadowed by dark clouds. I kept suffering panic attacks during Hillel events. I was asked to report to the Director who told me that maybe I should “take a break from attending Hillel events until I felt more like myself.” He suggested that I keep my distance for a while. As torn as I already was, I felt like a major part of my foundation was ripped out from under me. Didn’t they understand that my involvement in Hillel was one of the things that helped give me stability amongst my depression and anxiety? I no

longer felt welcomed into my community. I no longer felt like I was part of something. I felt alone. I felt scared. I felt lost.

Fortunately, I received the treatment and support that I needed to overcome my anxiety and depression during college. But mental health treatment is expensive. Our mental health system remains underfunded and inaccessible to many. Even though the Affordable Care Act requires that mental health services must be covered by insurance plans, they often do not provide adequate coverage. In addition, low reimbursement rates have prevented many physicians from accepting insurance policies at all. The result is that many individuals choose not to get the treatment they need because they cannot afford it.

Mental illness affects our youth too. It is common for kids to experience various types of emotional distress as they develop and mature. For some adolescents, in particular, the demands of school, extracurricular activities, chores, and friendship often can result in anxiety and depression that persists. It's essential that we help our youth find the support and professional assistance they need to be successful.

A student, Alex, recently pulled me aside after religious school one afternoon. He shared with me that he had felt bullied all day. Some of his best friends no longer were talking to him because he was acting *too* sad and had become agitated easily. He knew he had been diagnosed with depression. He told me that he had been seeing a psychologist and had begun to take medications. Even as a 6th grader, he understood that medications could only take the "edge" off. He also was quite aware that finding the *right* medication for him would take some time. He struggled to keep up with his work in

school, and his teachers didn't seem to understand that he was suffering from an illness, not slacking off.

Alex's self-esteem was diminished each time someone called him a name, each time his teachers did not know how to help him, and each time his friends spoke about him acting "crazy" behind his back. The stigma was as bad as the illness itself.

Let's create spaces for individuals like Alex to be heard without judgement. He represents only one of the few who are courageous enough to share their pain with others. Here in Fairfield County, teachers in Norwalk, Weston, Wilton, Trumbull, and Bridgeport schools are strongly encouraged to take a Mental Health First Aid training course as part of their professional development. This training enables them to better identify the symptoms of those with mental illness and prepares them to help their students. Mental health education is also now incorporated in many schools' civics curricula, including right here in Westport. We are teaching our children to not be bystanders when they see their classmates being bullied, having a bad day, or when they notice a classmate's behavior has changed.

I want to recognize that the majority of us here this morning are not mental health professionals. Nor am I. There are many ways, though, in which we can help the ones we love.

In the cases of Dena and Alex, I was able to do something that we can all do: we can listen. We can be there for others. We can be present. We can be supportive. If we notice a friend or family member struggling emotionally, we can address it. Knowing that someone is there to help is the number one reason in which those with mental illness

seek treatment. Our willingness to advocate for them gives them the strength to overcome the barriers they face.

We can also be attentive to the language that we use. Our words can have a huge impact on the people around us. Much like we are taught to not say that a person is autistic, but rather, they are an individual with autism, we can be mindful of the way we talk about mental illness. Rather than calling a person schizophrenic, for example, we can say that they are an individual with schizophrenia. Too many times we put the illness before the person. We cannot forget that mental illness does not define who they are.

We can know what resources are available so we can direct those we care for to the right places for help. Jewish Family Services and the Laurel House in Stamford offer counseling and services to help those affected by mental illness navigate their lives. We can also learn more about it. Organizations such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness provide free online materials that can help us better understand mental illnesses.

And moreover, your clergy is here to support you and your families during times of difficulty. Whether it is because you are struggling financially, have received life-altering news, or simply feel lost, we will never turn you away. We will show you compassion. We will accept you. You need not to be silent. You can have a voice again.

It is unfortunate that it has taken violent acts to prompt these conversations about mental illness. But let us create some good out of these tragedies.

My we hear the calls of the shofar, which opens our hearts and strengths our awareness of stigma.

May we feel empowered to reach our hands out to those who need more light amongst the darkness.

May we will feel brave enough to share our own struggles with depression, anxiety, or other mental illnesses.

And may all of us feel safe, loved, and cared for, knowing that we are not alone.
For this and more, Ken Yehi Ratzon. May it ever be so.