



Torah Reflections for *Shabbat Shuva*

8 Tishrei, 5781

September 26, 2020

I have spent many hours serving as a chaplain in a doorway.

While serving the inpatient unit of a psychiatric hospital, on my way in and out of the unit every day I often encountered friends, family, loved ones and even professional care-givers of patients hesitating outside the locked door and nervously pacing in the hallway. Once I spent a long afternoon in this hallway with Mark, whose twenty-five year old son Sean was hospitalized to receive treatment for Bipolar Disorder. Sean had been struggling with the disease for many years. Mark had paid for his son to have the very best medical care, but he lamented that had rarely visited Sean when he was sick and he had not seen his son's face for nearly five years. As we talked it became clear to me that what was stopping Mark from ringing the doorbell was not just his fear about what might lie behind the doors and the social stigma connected to living with mental illness, but also a sense of overwhelm. "It's already too late," he said, "So many mistakes have been made between us. How can I fix anything now?"

Judaism speaks in a different voice about the capacity to heal relationships. This Shabbat is known as Shabbat Shuva, literally the Sabbath of Returning, that falls in between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur. Traditionally this Shabbat is a time when we turn towards each other and strive to draw closer. The Hebrew word *teshuva*, which is central to the High Holiday season, means "to turn". Teshuva implies a return to wholeness within the self, in our relationships to other people and with the divine.

The special *Haftarah*, prophetic reading, which is read on this day opens with the word "*Shuva*", the Hebrew imperative form of the word *teshuva*. "Return Israel!" this portion commands, "to the Eternal One, your God." Hosea 14:2)

Many years, Shabbat Shuva falls close to Mental Illness Awareness Week. Today one in four Americans is struggling with mental illness. Next time you are on the bus, at work, in the hospital, in your home or synagogue – look around you. Nearly a quarter of the people who surround you have been impacted by their own or a loved one's mental distress and emotional pain. If you are living with mental illness you are not alone. And yet the topic is surrounded by a silence that frequently leads to isolation and despair.

In the Talmud the story is told of a time when Rabbi Yochanan fell ill and Rabbi Hanina came to visit him. Rabbi Hanina saw that Yochanan was in pain -- a pain that is beyond words and he said: "Give me your hand." Rabbi Yochanan reached up his hand and Rabbi Hanina raised him up. Our Sages asked: "Why

could Rabbi Yochanan not raise himself?” The tradition answers, “The prisoner cannot free himself from jail.” (Babylonian Talmud Brachot 5b) We learn from this story that when we are suffering we need someone to take our hands. Just as prisoners cannot free themselves alone, healing happens in relationship.

There are many ways that we can reach out our hands to those living with mental illness, their friends, family and care-givers. We can tell our own stories of mental illness and healing, and honor the bravery it takes when we hear others speak out about their struggles with mental distress. We can mention mental illness in prayer and examine the way we use theology to make sure we are not communicating the message that those who are ill are weak or morally flawed. And we can stay in touch by sending cards or offering video conference calls, with those who are sick when they are home-bound; and by phone when they are in the hospital.

In the end all Mark needed in order to draw closer to his son was for someone to listen to his fears and then simply reach out and unlock the door for him and silently accompany him through the entrance way. Like so many other people that I met both inside and in the doorway of the unit, what was needed was not any special skills or rabbinic counsel but basic human companionship – someone to listen and to walk with them.

During this week of Shabbat Shuva, the week of turning towards each other, may we unlock the doors of social stigma in our communities and the gates that surround our hearts and draw a little closer to those who are living with mental illness, as well as their friends, family and care-givers. And may we have faith that drawing closer to each other, even if it is only one step, is the first step towards healing in the New Year.

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This Torah Reflection was written by Rabbi Elliot Kukla of the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center. Gracious support is provided by the Jewish Community Federation and Endowment Fund. More information and healing-oriented resources can be found at www.JewishHealingCenter.org.