

## Mental Illness

### Suicide and Survivors-The Power of Hineni

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In the weeks since his death, Robin Williams' movies have been in high demand. His comedic talent stretches back for generations. From the sitcom Mork and Mindy to major films appealing to children and adults, Aladdin, Mrs. Doubtfire, Good Will Hunting, Dead Poets Society, Patch Adams, Good Morning Vietnam, and the list goes on. Robin Williams touched our lives as he brought laughter to the world. Sadly, as we learned last month, if not before, he struggled with depression. This mental illness led to his death.

Tributes abounded. Media coverage raised awareness of suicide prevention hotlines and support centers including the National Suicide Prevention center, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and the National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI). While William's death may be prominent in our minds, this is a topic that I've been contemplating for a long time. Recent suicides in our community including three Millburn young adults-[High School and college students] this past Winter have raised our awareness of mental illness.

My perspective is personal. I grew up in Livingston with my mother, father, older sister and dog in a loving family with devoted parents. We often celebrated the New Year along with my mom's birthday as she always turned the same age as the new year, 75 today, September 26. And, I spoke with my mom often when I was away at college... During the Fall semester of my senior year of college, my world was rocked when my mother died by suicide.

In the late 1980s, the terminology shared with me was that my mother had a chemical imbalance, what today we would call bipolar disorder. Growing up, my mom was fine and it was at the end of college that I faced the scary prospect of a mentally ill mother. Our family rallied around my depressed mother and hoped and prayed that treatment would bring healing. It was clear that she was suffering, so, it wasn't a total shock when she died my senior year. But, it was devastating.

When we think about suicide, we often focus on someone wanting to die. Rather, the individual is in pain and wants to end his or her suffering. The trials in our lives, whether physical, emotional, psychological or spiritual, are personal and life altering.

One of the reasons I love Judaism as a religion is because it does not ignore these painful facts of life. This morning we read the Akedah. In fact, some rabbis believed that our matriarch Sarah could have committed suicide and her death occurs immediately following the Akedah. Why do we read this challenging text on Rosh Hashanah? It provides an opportunity for us to discuss difficulties in families and scars that live in our hearts.

There is the personal trauma of Isaac, Abraham and Sarah, each forever changed by this terrifying incident.

Sarah is not mentioned in the text of the Akedah. It would have been impossible for Abraham to tell his wife that he and Isaac were going on a Father-Son trip in which God asked him to sacrifice Isaac. Maybe Sarah would have thought Abraham was trying to be a comedian, after all, Isaac's Hebrew name, Yitzhak, means 'he will laugh.' Instead, Abraham left without providing much information.

The text focuses on God's call to Abraham. Avraham, Avraham. The dialogue between father and son is sparse and Sarah's voice is absent, leaving painful gaps in the text. What were their thoughts? Did Abraham know he had to hide this from her because she would tell him he was crazy? Or, because he knew she was too delicate? I think that Abraham knew Sarah was fragile.

Prior to the Akedah, desperate to become a mother, Sarah encouraged her husband Abraham to take Hagar as a surrogate wife and have a child with her. Sarah was depressed that her body could not carry a child and thought this would be a beautiful path to motherhood. But as soon as Hagar was pregnant with Ishmael, the jealousy was immense...not surprising for one who suffered from infertility. A miracle occurred when Sarah and Abraham had their own son Isaac. Now a successful mother in her own right, Sarah could no longer bear to have Hagar and Ishmael in her presence.

God told Abraham to listen to his wife when she wanted to banish Hagar from their home. Abraham tried to please his wife. With God's advice, he honored Sarah's request! What an extremely painful thing for Abraham to do but he was trying so hard to help Sarah. Thus, when God asks Abraham to take his son Isaac to Mt. Moriah, it is no surprise Sarah is kept in the dark. Perhaps she was in the dark/depressed already.

The Torah does not explain why Abraham does not talk to Sarah about his plans for Isaac. Given this gap in the text, rabbinic tradition offers a variety of interpretations through Midrash.

The following Midrash suggests that Sarah was overly attached to Isaac:  
Don't take my son far from me and don't stay away long for my soul is strongly bound to his . . . And Sarah took Isaac her son and slept with him on that night and kissed him and hugged him and stayed with him until the morning. And she said to him, my son, how can my soul part from you and she kissed him and hugged him again and cried with him . . . And she dressed Isaac her son and put a turban on his head and placed a jewel in his cap. [Sefer HaYashar, Parshat Vayera]

It's unclear if Isaac was 17 or 37 at the time of the Akedah, but in either case, Sarah's behavior could be viewed as irrational. I understand a mother's love for her son, but

her intense concern about his departure with his father could indicate Sarah's instability. What if Sarah was severely depressed by threat of loss?

Did Abraham understand Sarah's mental state? In another midrash, it seems he knew how fragile she was.

... Abraham said, what shall I do? If I reveal it to Sarah - women are light-headed over small matters so even more so with serious matters. And if I don't reveal it to her and steal him away from her when she is not looking, she will kill herself. What did he do? He told Sarah, bring us some food and drink that we may celebrate ... this boy has not had an education, there is a place a small distance away where boys are educated ... I will take him and educate him there. [Midrash Tanhuma, Parshat Vayera 22]

This Midrash shows Abraham was truly concerned that Sarah might kill herself.

While the Torah does not tell us how Sarah died, we do know that her death is reported in the Torah just after the Akedah. Was it too much of a struggle for her to continue knowing she almost lost her son? To choose life over ending her pain? She may have died from shock after learning what Abraham intended to do. I believe that it is a reasonable possibility she died by suicide.

Judaism's attitude toward suicide is clear at first reading. The Torah states in The Ten Commandments, "Thou shalt not murder." (Exodus 20: 13 and Deuteronomy 5: 17). Generations later Maimonides writes that, "He who kills himself is guilty of bloodshed." (Hilchot Avelut 1)

However, to the extent Judaism condemns suicide is both simple and complicated.

Simple, because life is given by God, and only God has the right to take it away. The Jewish codes insist that the body belongs to the Almighty, and no one is permitted to harm, jeopardize or destroy God's property. Genesis 9:5 says, "*I will surely require an accounting for your life-blood*", and the sages say this includes a suicide (Bava Kamma 91b) Therefore, halakha, Jewish law, forbids traditional mourning customs for a suicide. BUT, the rabbis also recognized that since most people who do die by suicide are mentally unstable, these restrictions do **not** apply.

Moreover, and this is where Jewish authority's understanding expanded over the years, as we learn in Aruch HaShulchan (Yoreh De'ah 345:5), "This is the general principle in connection with suicide: we find any excuse we can and say he acted thus because he was in terror or great pain, or his mind was unbalanced, or he imagined it was right to do what he did because he feared that if he lived he would commit a crime... It is extremely unlikely that a person would commit such an act of folly unless his mind were disturbed".

There are a couple of suicides in the Tanakh.

We remember Samson, strong, warrior, whose key to strength, his long hair, was discovered by Delilah. Blinded and chained, Samson's hair grew back and his physical strength returned. His suicide (Judges 16: 30), in which he destroyed himself together with his Philistine tormentors, is defended on the grounds that it constituted an act of *kiddush hashem*, "sanctification of the divine name," in the face of heathen mockery of the God of Israel.

King Saul's suicide (I Samuel 31: 4-5) is defended on the grounds that he feared torture if he were captured by the Philistines and would have died in any event as a result of the torture.

King Saul and Samson are well-known Biblical figures, though there is not as much emphasis by the rabbis' on their deaths. But, Jewish tradition certainly does not glorify suicide and it is viewed as forbidden except in the case of idolatry, sexual misconduct and murder. [Talmud Sanhedrin 74a]

Although not the same as suicide, there are a few Biblical figures that ask to die. Surprisingly, the first one is Moses. After the episode of the Golden Calf, Moses says to God, "Now, if You will forgive their sin [well and good]; but if not, erase me from the record which You have written." [Ex. 32:32] The simple meaning is Moses is asking not to be written in the Torah unless the people are forgiven. But, the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 16 b) suggests that Moses not be written in the "Book of Life" unless the people are forgiven. Without forgiveness, Moses prefers death.

Elijah (I Kings 19), the prophet we mention during Havdallah, at a Bris and on Passover, struggled as well. After leading a battle against enemies of Israel, his life was at risk. Feeling like a failure, he prayed to die. The text in I Kings shows how an angel of God touched him twice and helped restore his strength.

A third character to ask to die we will hear more about on Yom Kippur afternoon, as the Haftarah reading is the Book of Jonah. Jonah is the prophet who tried to run away from God's call. He didn't want to go to Ninevah because if he did and the people repented, God wasn't going to punish them. Therefore, Jonah felt it would be a futile mission. He said, "O God! Isn't this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I know that You are El Rachum v'Chanun, Erech Apayim, v'Rav Chesed-- compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment. Please, God take my life, for I would rather die than live. God replied, "Are you that deeply grieved?" [Jonah 4:2-4] and a little bit later, Jonah begged for death after the plant that sheltered him from the sun died.

When we feel desperate, we too may utter such words. Often these words are a toss away but it's imperative to explore what someone really means when they say they want to die.

It is likely that we have all felt depressed at some point in our lives. Depression as a mental illness though is different than feeling down or depressed.

Consider this commentary from Etz Hayim about the Ten Plagues: The 9<sup>th</sup> plague of Darkness: Exodus 10:23 [p.377]

“Perhaps the darkness was not physical but rather spiritual. The word ‘melancholy’ comes from the Greek root meaning ‘dark mood.’ If you’re depressed, you don’t have the energy to focus or be concerned about anyone other than yourself. Maybe the Egyptians were depressed. After 8 plagues. Maybe they realized they had been living comfortably because others were enslaved.”

One who cannot recognize his neighbor (the Egyptians) is incapable of spiritual growth.

In contrast, the Talmud teaches that [BT Berachot 9B] dawn is defined as “when one can recognize the face of a friend.”

This story from the Talmud illuminates the power of friends supporting one another:

Rabbi Hiya bar Abba was sick, and Rabbi Yohanan went to visit him. Rabbi Yohanan asked, are your sufferings welcome to you? Rabbi Hiya bar Abba said, neither they nor their reward. Rabbi Yohanan said, “Give me your hand.” He gave him his hand, and he raised him up. He was cured. Then, Rabbi Yohanan himself became sick. Rabbi Hanina went to visit him, and asked him the same question. Are your sufferings welcome to you? Rabbi Yohanan replied, neither they nor their reward. Rabbi Hanina said, “Give me your hand.” He gave him his hand, and he raised him up. He was cured. The rabbis in the Talmud ask: Why couldn’t Rabbi Yohanan heal himself? The response? A prisoner cannot free himself from jail.

When we are down, we need others to lift us up and help us through difficult times.

Suicide touches many lives---In our community, adults and children. Fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews, nieces, grandparents grandchildren, friends. We are survivors.

What can we do to help someone in need? [[www.afsp.org](http://www.afsp.org)] Here are some things I’ve learned to look out for: if you notice a change in someone’s sleeping pattern, appetite, loss of energy, particularly someone already diagnosed with a mental illness, or recurrent thoughts about death or suicide, the person may be at risk. When in doubt about a loved one, seek help.

Environmental stressors are also a factor. If a person is bullied, and has a disposition for depression, she or he has a higher risk for suicide. LGBTQ youth are 4x more likely to attempt suicide than their straight peers. It is imperative to let them know that things can get better and that they have your love and support.

If I notice someone is depressed and behaving in a way that has me concerned, I will let him or her know and not be afraid to ask whether s/he is considering suicide. Asking will NOT give them the idea. While we can't try to argue someone out of suicide we can let him/her know we care and he/she is not alone. Sometimes these feelings can be temporary and there is treatment for depression. If the person doesn't have a mental health professional, we can help them find someone. But if the crisis is acute, it's time to call 911.

Suicidal people may be hesitant to ask for continued support. Medication often has side effects and takes time to work or needs to be adjusted. Sometimes individuals decide to stop taking their medication. Talk therapy and medication are two paths that can work well together. But it seldom is an easy fix. The road to healing is often under construction with detours, loops and frustrating slow downs or reversals. We can strive to balance doing all that we can to be supportive while not blaming ourselves when or if suicide happens.

A few years ago, I called a friend to ask a question. When he answered the phone, he didn't sound like himself. I realized immediately that I could not pose my original question and instead asked if he was okay. His answer was a little fuzzy and the conversation ended quickly. I told him that I would check back with him in a little while.

I sat for a couple of minutes, disturbed by how he sounded. I called him back to check on him and when another phone call yielded no response, I decided to call the police and request an ambulance. I hailed a taxi to go check on my friend.

When I arrived at the apartment the police were already there and had gone inside. They asked how I knew him and then I saw it: the note to his children; the list of his passwords. This was a suicide attempt. Fortunately, he was alive and there were no lasting effects from the pills he had taken.

[May the One who has delivered me from harm be blessed...Sheg'malani...]

...Months later, this friend came to meet with me. It was one of the most intense conversations. He told me how he was sorry to put me through such a difficult situation. He told me that he knew my mom died by suicide and he couldn't imagine how I felt finding him. He was thanking me for helping to save him. It was an opportunity I didn't look for but was so grateful. I was able to help him. I didn't get that chance with my mom and even if I had, I don't know if it would have been successful.

He read my heart and spoke to it. I trembled. I was speechless. I was grateful.

Judaism teaches us to save a life is to save the whole world.

Oh God, I wish that we could save every person from illness. But illness, mental or physical, is real and sometimes terminal.

When someone we know dies by suicide, we are in shock. We might feel depressed, angry, relieved or guilty.

So often we search for a reason “why”—Why did this happen. What could I have done to prevent this? Did I miss a sign or clue? I know I wrestled with these questions for a long time and it has taken me many years to address this topic publicly. But I could not let another year go by without doing so. Suicide is in our community and touches all of our lives. In 2011, the most recent statistics available, there were 39,518 suicides, the 10<sup>th</sup> leading cause of death in America.

My community of Millburn was shattered by three deaths in 6 weeks this past February to March and in January 2013, there were two deaths in one weekend. Members of our congregation’s families have been affected by suicides in recent months and years. Suicide is not a topic only of celebrities. It’s here. It’s part of our Jewish community. AND It’s personal.

In times of joy and times of sadness, we will be present. On rare occasions, that presence can even lead to saving a life.

Suicide is a cause of death for many. And the wake of victims it leaves behind is countless. If we are blessed enough to make one call that saves another’s life, how awesome is that.

Suicide. It’s a word we can all say. We all know someone, whether a family member, friend, or friend of a friend, who died by suicide.

Now is the time for us not to be afraid to reach out  
Not to be afraid to ask questions  
To move beyond hopelessness  
To deconstruct the myth that if you mention it, you’re planting the idea in someone’s head  
There’s no guarantee you can save someone’s life. But it’s better to put aside your fears and actually reach out  
The more we talk about it the more we remove its stigma.

Whenever I tell someone how my mother died, it’s a conversation stopper. Many have responded, oh, I thought it was cancer. That’s a more “normal” way to die. Years ago people used to whisper the word “cancer.” Cancer exists. Mental illness exists, and it’s time to remove the stigma of it from those suffering and their family and friends.

Why are we afraid to say suicide? Why is there a sense of judgment. What are we judging? Is there a sense of guilt, powerlessness (u’netaneh tokef)  
There are things we don’t want to discuss because they’re so terrifying.  
The deepest meaning is in figuring out what do we do with the love we have for people in our lives that are suffering. How can we help them? And how can we find solace in knowing we are not always able to help them?

This is the season of teshuva, return and not necessarily knowing if there was anything we could have done differently.

This is the season for selicha, forgiveness.

It is a time for forgiveness of deceased and of those living.

It is a time for Compassion

Pirke Avot teaches us “Judge not your fellow until you stand in his place.” On this Yom haDin, day of Judgment, let us remember to balance din, judgment, with rachamim, compassion.

Adonai Adonai, el rachum v’chanun, erech apayim v’rav chesed v’emet, notzer chesed la’alafim nosei avon vafesha v’chata’a v’nakeh

Adonai, Adonai, God of Compassion, Gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness and truth, treasuring love for a thousand generations...

On this New Year, 5775, help us God to be present to one another.

Help us to answer the call Hineni---to be there and be present.

Soften us that we may look upon one another in mercy and kindness

Open our hearts to hear each other’s truths—the peaks and the valleys

May this New Year, 5775, be a year full of healing and love, sweetness and peace, more light than darkness, more joy than sadness. Amen.