

Beyond Body and Soul: Attending to the Mind

A Kol Nidre Sermon by Rabbi Ben Goldstein

A man goes to a doctor. He explains to the doctor that he's depressed. He says that life seems very harsh and cruel. He says that, even surrounded by people, he feels all alone in this threatening world where what lies ahead is vague and uncertain. The Doctor smiled kindly and says, "The treatment is simple. The great clown Pagliacci is in town tonight. Go and see him. That should pick you right up." All of a sudden, the man bursts into tears. He says, "But doctor...I am Pagliacci."¹

That story was widely told around the time Robin Williams's death. Many of you know the story already, but if you don't, Robin Williams was one of the most dynamic and brilliant performers we have ever seen. A man blessed with God-given talent, a brilliant mind, and a successful career. Unfortunately, he was also a man who was tortured by mental illness and addiction for most of his life.

When I was a kid, Robin Williams was like a God to me. Much to the dismay of my teachers, all of my friends and I knew his comedy routines and monologues by heart and we performed them with glee. Yes, we could recite lines back and forth from most of his movies, but none of us could ever know the pain that he felt.

After his death, many people talked about his suicide and the choice he made to end his life. One talk radio host seized upon the opportunity to turn it into a referendum on politics and happiness. But let me be clear about something, let me state something here and now, unequivocally. Robin Williams did not kill himself. Let me repeat that. **Robin Williams did not kill himself.** He died of a horrible disease; a disease from which far too many suffer, and far too few understand.

One of the things I love most about my job is the weekly class that I teach on Thursday mornings (11:30, don't miss it). Every week, before we begin we go around the table and talk about what's going on, we schmooze. We talk about the ailments from which this person or that person is suffering. As one person put it, it's an organ recital. But one thing we don't talk about, the one thing that no one brings up, is how people are doing mentally.

It's only the rare, brave soul who is open with their struggles with mental illness. Even though we've come so far in our society, there continues to be a stigma. There continues to be the perception that struggles with depression, with addiction or Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, are a matter of choice. They are no more a matter of choice than the person who has cancer.

The lack of dialogue about mental health has led to some incredibly unsophisticated thinking. There is still a stigma for those who suffer from, or are treated for mental illness. Out of ignorance, people associate much of mental illness to parental failure. At times our culture is so focused on the physical, focusing on what we look like, so focused on the surface, that we lose sight of the mental and the spiritual.

Today is Yom Kippur. Today we ignore our physical needs, our physical appearance. After this afternoon, we won't eat, and we won't shower for 25 hours. Instead of wearing our nicest shoes, we wear sneakers or some other non-leather shoe. Today is the day that we attempt to demonstrate that,

¹ From Alan Moore's *Watchmen*.

in spite of the fact that our souls are housed in flesh, we can transcend our physical existence to become Godlike souls. Today we acknowledge the fact that our being is not just one element, we either neither purely physical nor spiritual. Our physical and spiritual existences weave together to create the totality of our being. We are body, we are mind and we are souls. And just like our bodies can be healthy or sick, our minds and our souls can feel affliction.

The Jewish tradition has known about mental illness since the time of the bible. After the death of King David, the new hero of the bible was Elijah, Elijah. A miracle maker, we see that he is able to revive a boy thought to be dead, he is able to defeat the 50 false prophets of Baal, and yet even he is not free from torment. After his great victory against the prophets of Baal, Elijah is told that the queen, Jezebel wants to kill him. Instead of fighting, his reaction is quite curious. We are told, "When he heard that, he arose, and ran for his life, he came to Beer-sheba." Okay, so far so good, but then we read this, "He left his servant there and he went a day's journey into the wilderness by himself. He came and sat down under a broom-tree; and he asked to die; he said: 'It is enough; now God, take away my life.'

Eliyahu is ready to give up, he is ready to die. He feels alone, he feels like there is no one who can comfort him, so he waits for God to take his life. But an angel approaches Elijah and gives him the strength to go on.

Eliyahu is beautifully portrayed by the biblical author as this damaged person. Yes, he is able to work miracles, but he is constantly on the outside. Yes, he speaks to God. But that causes him to feel alone, to feel cut off from the rest of his people living around him. No one should ever have to feel that isolation. No one should ever feel that they are alone.

That is one of the reasons I am talking about this issue tonight. To all of those who are suffering with mental illness, know this; you are not alone. You are never alone. All you need to do is to ask for help. Here in this community, you will always have someone to whom you can look, to whom you can talk. You are not alone.

To those who have a family member or loved one who is suffering, know this; you are not alone either. Your loved one's disease is not a personal or parental failure, it is biochemistry and genetics. You do not have to hide their affliction. You do not have to be embarrassed or scared to share the suffering and pain that you feel. You are a part of a community that is ready, willing, and able to embrace you and your entire family. This is a community that shows kindness, chesed to all those who are suffering, no matter the nature of their affliction.

In tractate Brachot the Talmud tells a story of R. Yochanan who went to visit his friend, R. Elazar. We are told that R. Elazar was sitting on the ground, in the darkness and crying. When R. Yochanan came in, it says that just his presence brought light into the room. Rabbi Yochanan sat down with his friend and asked, "Why are you crying?" Rabbi Elazar looked at his friend and said, "I am weeping on account of this beauty that is going to rot in the earth." Rabbi Yochanan nodded to his friend and said, "On that account you surely have a reason to weep." And they both wept. They wept for their lives, and for their deaths, whenever they would come.

What R. Yochanan did next was to ask for R. Elazar's hand. With that, the Talmud tells us, R. Elazar was revived. Just from reaching out for R. Yochanan's hand, from sharing a touch, R. Elazar was able to be revived. The Talmud is puzzled and asks a question of this episode. "If he was revived so easily, why did he not revive himself?" A poetic answer given is, "a captive cannot release himself from prison." Someone who is suffering, whether mentally or physically, needs help from those around them to release themselves from their prison.

When someone suffers from a mental illness, they feel imprisoned, they feel alone. We see from our story that all it takes sometimes is for a friend to literally reach out, to free them. It is up to us not only as a community, but as individuals to provide the love and friendship that Rabbi Yochanan demonstrated. We have the power to bring light into the darkness.

I am not a doctor. I am not here tonight to talk to you about the medical diagnosis or treatment for mental illness, because I am not qualified to do so. What I am qualified to talk about is the spiritual affliction of Mental illness, the almost universal feeling that has been described by so many poets, philosophers, theologians, and sages.

Many of you have heard me speak about my time working at Beit Teshuva, a recovery center in Los Angeles for drug and alcohol addiction. My title there was that of a spiritual counselor. Okay, that's a great title, but when I got the job, I wasn't sure what it meant. I knew that I was to be one part of a three-pronged approach to helping those suffering with addiction. Each resident had a therapist, a sponsor and a spiritual counselor. The therapist or psychologist was there to help them with psychological issues they faced. The sponsor or addiction specialist would help them through the 12 steps of recovery. I still didn't know what my job was, until my boss, Rabbi Mark Borovitz, explained that I was to be a spiritual therapist, in his words, an advocate for the soul. Other people would help with psychological issues and issues of addiction, but I was there to help with the part of the soul that was afflicted.

I believe in this holistic approach to mental health. Yes, of course I know that psychology and medicine are infinitely important when treating mental illness, and when looking out for our own mental well-being. But I also know that, at times there is an element missing. While paying so much attention to our medical solutions, we often neglect another aspect of ourselves. We often ignore the needs of our souls. We know that our physical health depends on a number of factors, what we eat, whether or not we exercise, genetics, and many others. The same is true for mental health. Having worked and spoken with many professionals in the mental health field, I have come to a radical conclusion. I want to tell you that religion, a connection to something greater than ourselves can improve our mental health.

What I mean by that, is that if done correctly, a spiritual discipline or practice can be a great exercise for our brains. Yes, I know how I sound. You might be picturing crystals and mood rings, and other non-traditional images. But it has been scientifically proven that meditation can help improve our health.

There have been published studies and articles written in such new agey places as the New England Journal of Medicine, the Wall Street Journal, and the Washington Post just to name a few.

This is not news to us. We have seen that spiritual dedication can have an amazing effect on our lives. I'd like to share with you a teaching from Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, one of the great thinkers of the 20th century, and the first chief rabbi of Israel. He writes,

If a person should seek for themselves less than a life oriented toward God, they will at once become like a ship tossed about at sea. Stormy waves will continually rob them of peace. If he or she should be able to immerse themselves in some preoccupation, they may succeed for a time, and it will seem as if they have finally found peace. But it will not take long and the spirit will break out of its imprisonment and the maddening agitation will begin to act in all its fury. The place where we may find peace is only in god.

I believe that Rav Kook is right. Not because I believe that faith in god is the answer to mental illness, but we all need to reach out to something. We are more than just our bodies. Our souls, our spirit needs sustenance as well. What R. Kook is describing is so human, so basic, that its profundity is matched only by its simplicity.

I realize the leap some people think I'm making. I understand that there can be a tendency to roll our eyes at the idea of nourishing our soul just as we do with our bodies. But we have seen the nature of our care evolve over time. Before Freud and Jung, we did not know how to treat someone with mental illness. It is only in the last 150 years that we are beginning to understand how to look out for our mental health. It's only in the last 30 years that we are beginning to fully understand the need for physical exercise in order for us to stay healthy. And just in the past few years, study after study has shown us the benefits of meditation, of a spiritual discipline. Basically, having a mental practice can help us with both mental and physical ailments.

We seek to connect. For some of us like Rav Kook, we seek to connect with God. But sometimes it's too much to ask us to connect to God. What we seek then is to connect with others. More than anything, what those suffering from mental illness need, is to connect, to feel like they are not alone. To be able to see the light in that the prison, that hole in which they find themselves.

From the Psalms,

“Why so downcast, my soul, why so disquieted within me? Have hope in God... Oh my God, my soul is downcast; therefore I think of you...”

As we read in this account, there is a connection between depression, between that utter loneliness, and the desire to reach out to God.

No, I do not think that religion can cure mental illness. But we have just woken up to the reality that exercise is essential to our well-being. It is time to realize that our spiritual health is just as important. Yes, treadmills, sports, swimming are all great. We have changed our lives to fit this in. I am here to wake us up to a need we may not have even known about. Making time for meditation, or prayer, finding time to nourish our souls is as important as our physical exertion. We are not either minds, we are not either souls or bodies, we are both. And both deserve our attention.

This day, once a year we prove that we are more than just our physical selves. We prove that we can go without food and water and aspire to be angelic.

And we are more. Faith of any kind can help us. Knowing that there is a creator who cares for us can help us to feel less alone. When we read the misheberach prayers, we pray not only for a full recovery for a body, but we say *תפילה*, a healing for the soul. We know that when our souls are afflicted, we cannot feel physically healthy. When we are spiritually or mentally sick, we cannot feel well physically.

It is my hope and prayer that we find time this year for ourselves, for our souls. It is my hope that we are blessed to merit inscribing and sealing ourselves into the book of life. That we make time for prayer. I pray that we are able to nourish our souls as we do our bodies. I pray that we have the strength to reach out for help, and that we ensure that no one should ever feel alone again, Shana Tova.

~Rabbi Ben Goldstein, Temple Beth-El Mekor Chayim, Cranford, NJ, October 7, 2014 (Used with permission.)