

## Mental Health

Sermon, Yom Kippur 2018 | Rabbi Jessica Wainer

When we read Torah, especially on a day like Yom Kippur, the words challenge us to consider how we live our lives and design our world. This morning we read, *Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem* – We stand here, this day, together before Adonai our God. In using this extra word, *kulchem*, our Torah Portion commands us to include everyone. And when we say words like *kulchem* – all of us, we strive to include all people – all races, all religions, all colors, all gender identities and sexualities. We pride ourselves on believing that everyone is welcome in our community. We build our institutions – schools, community centers, synagogues – around a common assumption that everyone is included.

Later our portion commands us, “I put before you this day life and death, blessing and curse.” *u'vacharta b'chayim* – Choose life that you should live. When we hear words like “choose life” we usually think of living intentionally. Rabbis preach sermons about taking time for family. We celebrate life cycle events and Jewish holidays. We assume that “choose life” means everyone is celebrating the life that they are living. We build this desire to live intentionally into our religious education, *b'nai mitzvah*, and confirmation.

But what if we are wrong? What if these terms actually refer to something else? What if the education we provide misses a core component that is so much more basic than teaching the holidays, history or Hebrew? And what if there is an aspect of *u'vacharta b'chayim* that refers not just to the choice to live intentionally, but actually the choice to live at all.

We base our assumptions about what these terms mean upon the fact that mental health and wellness are often such a taboo topic. We do not want to even consider them. There is such a stigma around people with mental illness. This stigma often prevents us from reaching out and ensuring we welcome them into our community. We do not even consider it.

We can do this no longer.

When we are at our breaking point and mental illness strikes, *u'vacharta b'chayim*, “Choose Life” does not seem like much of a choice. It does not seem like God has set before us blessing and curse, only curse. Everyone else seems “normal” – smiling, happy and functioning and then there’s this weight hanging around my consciousness and my selfhood. Choosing life, a direct command from our text, choosing to function even with this weight around one’s neck is a daily struggle. A struggle people are losing too often.

A few weeks ago, the brother of a former colleague died by suicide. He was 17. He had struggled with mental illness for a number of years. Her brother left a series of notes describing his isolation; his anguish and pain were palpable. In addition to saying things like “I don’t deserve to live because of how much mental pain I’m in,” I was stunned when he said, “I’m

misunderstood. I'm a fish out of water no matter where I go. End of discussion.”<sup>1</sup> The social isolation, the lack of a *kulchem*, seemed as toxic as the underlying mental anguish.

For far too long our tradition misunderstood suicide. The Genesis verse “but for your own life-blood I will require a reckoning”<sup>2</sup> and further Talmud<sup>3</sup> commentary interpreted this to mean that suicide is prohibited, considered as an equivalent to murder. It was seen as such an affront against God that the 16<sup>th</sup> century guide to Jewish law, the Shulchan Aruch, determined that anyone who died by suicide should not be mourned or receive a eulogy, only receiving a single recitation of the Mourner’s Kaddish. We have come a long way since then. Even as early as 1923, Reform Responsa clarified that “one is considered a suicide only when there is absolute certainty that he premeditated and committed the act with a clear mind not troubled by some great fear or worry which might have beset him...”<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Mark Washofsky and other modern scholars have used the modern understanding of suicide as the byproduct of mental illness to write modern responsa clarifying that even when the death is ruled a suicide, Jewish custom is to treat the death like any other death including full burial and mourning rituals. If Jewish tradition can evolve to include the mentally ill in death, then can we evolve to include them in life?

In staggering numbers released by the CDC, nearly one in five adults in America has a diagnosable mental health disorder.<sup>5</sup> Half of all our teens in America today have a diagnosable mental health disorder<sup>6</sup>, from attention deficit disorders to depression, from schizophrenia to eating disorders, from addiction to anxiety. These are staggering numbers. Mental health disorders are treatable like other medical conditions such as asthma, diabetes and high cholesterol. And yet, they can be exacerbated by environmental factors, especially a trigger that pervades our lives today: stress.

This is especially potent for our children. We spend so much time stressing about our student’s academic achievements, running from one activity to the next, with only enough time to eat a protein bar in between Hebrew school and soccer. Teens who participated in listening sessions with VOICE described the “toxic school environment” where students, parents and school administration put so much stress on themselves and others that they always feel as though they are in constantly in competition with one another. Technology adds the stress of social media. We have to curate the perfect Instagram account, craft the perfect tweet and make sure that we have a large enough network of friends on Facebook that we appear “popular.” Parents now hire tutors to help their children fit in to the world of Fortnite! A Pew Research report studied people who frequently used technology and found that social media makes one “more aware of stressful events in the lives of their friends and family. This increased awareness of

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://thejewishnews.com/2018/09/13/too-much-to-bear-teen-suicide/>

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 9:5

<sup>3</sup> Bava Kama 91b

<sup>4</sup> CCAR Responsa 88. Burial from the Temple, also with Reference to Burial of Suicides, (Vol. XXXIII, 1923, pp.61-63)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/mental-illness.shtml>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/mental-illness.shtml>

stressful events in other people's lives may contribute to the stress people have in their own lives.”<sup>7</sup> This is the world of our youth.

The Hebrew for the term *u'vacharta b'chayim* contains a deeper hint about mental illness. In Hebrew, the same root for “to choose” vocalized differently can also mean “to cause someone else to choose.” The command to choose life is not only telling us that each of us have to choose life, but it is also telling us that we play a role in how others choose life as well. Our actions, or lack thereof, send a message to those struggling. In changing our message and ridding our community of assumptions we can, together, help others to choose life.

This summer I caught a glimpse of how this works when I had the honor to be on faculty at the 6-Points Creative Arts Academy. As I walked around the new campus with a 10-year old camper, before camp even began, we made small talk about the summer, especially swimming because he was very anxious about going swimming. Then he shared the following with me, “I’m an anxious kid and my therapist says that I do better when I know all of the information ahead of time so I can process it.” As I picked my jaw up off the ground, I thought to myself, “How amazing is it that there are places in the world where people feel so welcomed from the very beginning that they feel comfortable sharing their needs so that we can best support them.”

For this child, the Creative Arts Academy was enabling him to *u'vacharta b'chayim* – to choose life. What the camp established this summer is an ecosystem in which everyone present is invested in the wellbeing of everyone else without preconceptions about mental health. Together, all of us worked to create an intentional community where no one felt like an outsider. This was a moment of *Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem* – we stand here all of us together on this day. What would it take for us to do this here at NVHC?

We must first recognize that if we continue to think of *kulchem* as including only traditional categories like race, class and gender, and we think of *u'vacharta b'chayim* as living intentionally, then we are contributing to the problem. Through these assumptions, our community contributes to the pain of the mentally ill, but we can respond through our education and how we frame involvement in the Jewish community.

The first step in transforming our *kulchem* is to host a Mental Health First Aid training at NVHC. How many of you are CPR certified? AED? First-Aid? A Mental Health First Aid training allows us to assist others in emergency situations, such as when people experience panic attacks or reactions to a traumatic event or suicidal thoughts or behaviors. “Mental Health First Aid helps [us] assist someone experiencing a mental health or substance use-related crisis.”<sup>8</sup> In hosting this training, we are choosing life in the most literal sense. When someone is experiencing a mental health crisis we may not know what medication they need or what longer term support

---

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/01/15/psychological-stress-and-social-media-use-2/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/take-a-course/what-you-learn/>

they will require, but we can provide assistance in the moment to ensure that they are safe and cared for. We can say to them *atem nitzavim hayom kulchem*- we stand here together today, all of us, including you who is struggling in the moment; *u'vacharta b'chayim* – and in this moment we are helping you to choose life.

Our second step in transforming *kulchem* and NVHC is to normalize mental wellbeing. We can do this by working to become an intentional Jewish community where people can come to be in dialogue and find resources pertaining to mental health. Beginning this fall, we hope to lay the groundwork for us to become this type of community. On October 9, NVHC will be hosting a community conversation on mental health. Following the success of our previous community conversations, this gathering aims to be the first step in igniting a congregational initiative around mental health disorders and mental wellness. While we do not yet know what the outcome will be, we hope that this conversation will be a starting place for our community to address specific issues around mental illness that affect us.

I invite all of you, those who are here with us physically and those watching at home, to be a part of our community conversation. Help us to understand how we can best support those in our community with mental health disorders and address the issue of growing stress in our lives. Help us by sharing if you or your child is struggling with anxiety or ADHD before the stress of *b'nai mitzvah* is on the horizon. Help us begin to identify and create some of the tools that we can use together to create a more mentally healthy environment for our congregants, young and old.

Our third, and perhaps most broad, step is to join together in supporting VOICE's initiative of "lifting students up instead of locking them down." VOICE is working with FCPS and the Commonwealth of Virginia to commit to investing in mental health. VOICE is hoping to use our October action as a springboard for working with Governor Northam and the General Assembly to undertake a number of initiatives pertaining to student mental health and wellness. This includes providing greater funding for school psychologists in public schools, freeing up the school counselors time to provide student counseling instead of proctoring tests and completing paperwork, and creating preventative and early intervention programs in our elementary schools. On October 21, VOICE will hold its annual October action, where Governor Northam has already committed to be present. Join us in asking Governor Northam and the General Assembly to help support mental wellness in our schools, to show our students that we all have a role in choosing life.

In this morning's liturgy we take communal responsibility for the sins that we have committed. Let this be another place in which we take communal responsibility. As we begin to focus on this initiative to learn more about mental health disorders and mental wellness, we open ourselves up to the idea that the assumptions we once made about the inclusion of our community are not yet quite enough. Our *kulchem* must be broader. As we do this work, we acknowledge that there is a flaw in our education, a flaw in the basic ways that we make assumptions about others in the room. When we engage with the topics of mental health disorders and mental wellness, we correct that flaw, and then we can say *Atem nitzavim hayom*

*kulchem, u'vacharta b'chayim-* We stand here together this day before Adonai, and we choose life, for us and for those in our community.