

# JAMI MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS SHABBAT

# Jami

The Mental Health Service for our Community

## 7-8 JANUARY 2022

# TOOLKIT

### OUR PARTNERS



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# WELCOME

Dear Friends,

The 6th Jami Mental Health Awareness Shabbat is an opportunity for the entire community to shine a light on mental health. It is vital that we continue to raise awareness and promote conversations around mental health, and challenge the stigma and discrimination that continues to prevent those needing support from seeking it.

We are delighted to be joined by synagogues throughout our community, schools, youth and university groups, organisations, individuals and families, who are marking this dedicated Shabbat.

Please take full advantage of all the available resources in the MHAS Toolkit and be sure to share your plans and stories with us.

Together we are transforming the mental health landscape in our community, and I could not be prouder.

Thank you for your support.

Best wishes,



**Laurie Rackind**  
Chief Executive



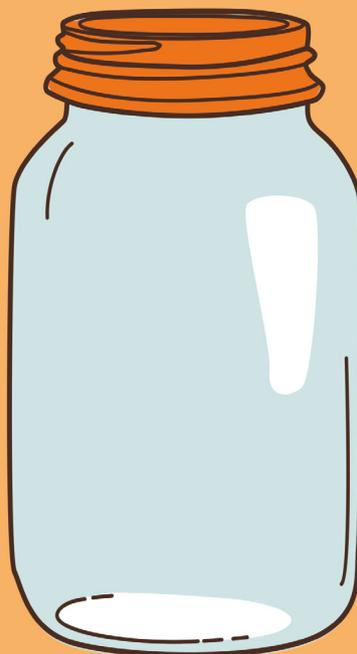
## ABOUT JAMI

**Jami exists to enrich and save lives impacted by mental illness in the Jewish community.**

Last year over 1,400 individuals received almost 50,000 separate service interactions, and we reached thousands more people through education, seminars, work in schools and with other organisations.

Through our social enterprise Head Room Café, we bring awareness, education and access to mental health support to the high street, with a free programme of groups and events open to everyone.

**To find out more please visit [jamiuk.org](http://jamiuk.org), email [info@jamiuk.org](mailto:info@jamiuk.org) or call 020 8458 2223**



**LABELS ARE FOR JARS. NOT PEOPLE.**

# WHY MARK THE JAMI MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS SHABBAT (MHAS)?

The MHAS falls annually on Shabbat “Bo”, the weekly Torah portion which tells about the Plague of Darkness. The description of the Plague of Darkness has particular resonance with mental illness – the darkness was so intense that people couldn’t move from their position. This has parallels with descriptions of mental illness.

Living through the pandemic has affected us all. This special Shabbat is an opportunity for us to encourage conversations on mental health, raise awareness of mental distress and share ideas on how to support ourselves and others within our community.

***It really is more important than ever to get involved in this vital initiative. Let’s make our own mental health and that of our communities a priority.***

talk talk talk  
mental health  
wellbeing recovery  
friendship  
fulfulness talk caring talk  
mind&body

## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

**There are many ways that you, your synagogue, school, student and youth group can get involved in 2022 and each community or individual is free to mark the MHAS in their own way.**

This Toolkit can assist you in doing so, for example by using one of the many sermons provided, arranging one of the activities included or using the conversation points as part of a discussion group.

Many communities choose to arrange for members of their congregation to share their own lived experience or invite mental health professionals to lead a talk, discussion or panel event. Jami will also have a great programme of online events that you and your community can participate in. Please go to [jamiuk.org/mhas](https://jamiuk.org/mhas) for more details and to register.

Please be sure to let us know what you have planned.

## JAMI EDUCATION COURSES & WORKSHOPS

**There are a variety of mental health awareness courses and workshops, facilitated by Jami, that can be booked for your community throughout the year.**

You can host a Jami course or a bespoke learning event can be created for your community.

Please download the prospectus here [jamiuk.org/education](https://jamiuk.org/education)

For any further guidance or support or to let us know what you have planned please email Laura Bahar at [laura.bahar@jamiuk.org](mailto:laura.bahar@jamiuk.org)

# KEY FACTS ON MENTAL HEALTH

## WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

Mental health refers to our cognitive, behavioural and emotional wellbeing - it is all about how we think, feel, and behave. It helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others and make choices.

Mental health also includes a person's ability to enjoy life - to attain a balance between life activities and efforts to achieve psychological resilience.

## WHAT IS MENTAL ILLNESS?

A medically diagnosable illness which can result from a number of factors including biological or developmental. It can affect the way we feel, act and think and disrupts our ability to work or carry out other daily activities and engage in satisfying personal relationships. It can be managed through prevention, diagnosis, treatment and mental health recovery.

## WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH RECOVERY?

Mental health recovery means being able to live a good life, as defined by the individual, with or without symptoms. It is a unique and personal experience that can have its ups and downs. Mental health recovery focusses on what a person CAN do rather than on what they can't. It is not necessarily easy or straightforward. Many people describe the need to persevere and to find ways to maintain hope through the most trying times.

## PARITY OF ESTEEM

The principle by which mental health must be given equal priority to physical health. It was enshrined in law in 2012. The government requires NHS England to work for parity of esteem to mental and physical health through the NHS Mandate. This has still not yet been realised.

## KEY FACTS ON MENTAL ILLNESS:

- One in six adults experienced some form of depression in summer 2021 (21 July to 15 August, Great Britain), compared with one in ten before the pandemic (July 2019 to March 2020). (ONS, 2021)
- Rates of probable mental disorder increased between 2017 and 2021 in 6 to 16 year olds from one in nine to one in six and in 17 to 19 year olds from one in ten to one in six. (NHS Digital, 2021)
- In 2020 there were 5224 suicides registered in England and Wales (10.0 deaths per 100,000 people). This is significantly lower than the 2019 rate, likely due to a decrease in male suicides at the start of the pandemic and delays in death registrations because of the pandemic. (ONS, 2021)
- In a National Union of Students poll of 4,000 students, 52% reported that their mental health had deteriorated or been affected negatively by Covid-19. However only 29% of those had looked for help. (nus student survey, 2020)
- In a survey investigating how the COVID-19 pandemic affected Jews across the UK a clear trend was seen with respect to synagogue membership. Mental distress is notably higher among those who are not synagogue members than among those who are. (JPR Hidden Effects Survey, July 2020)
- Impact on wellbeing and lack of freedom and independence remain the ways life is most affected by the pandemic for adults experiencing some form of depression. (ONS, 2021)

# NHS 5 WAYS TO WELLBEING

**Evidence suggests there are five steps we can all take to improve our mental wellbeing.**

If you give them a try, you may feel happier, more positive and able to get the most from life.



## CONNECT

Connect with the people around you: your family, friends, colleagues and neighbours. Spend time developing these relationships.



## BE ACTIVE

You don't have to go to the gym. Take a walk, go cycling or play a game of football. Find an activity that you enjoy and make it a part of your life.



## KEEP LEARNING

Learning new skills can give you a sense of achievement and a new confidence. So why not sign up for that cooking course, start learning to play a musical instrument, or figure out how to fix your bike?



## GIVE TO OTHERS

Even the smallest act can count, whether it's a smile, a thank you or a kind word. Larger acts, such as volunteering at your local community centre, can improve your mental wellbeing and help you build new social networks.



## BE MINDFUL

Be more aware of the present moment, including your thoughts and feelings, your body and the world around you. Some people call this awareness "mindfulness". It can positively change the way you feel about life and how you approach challenges.

Practising each of the five ways to wellbeing every day can have a very positive impact on your mood and wellbeing. These are also things which are encouraged in the Jewish tradition.

The Five Ways to Good Mental Wellbeing & Judaism has been designed by Good Thinking in collaboration with Jami, in consultation with Rabbi Miriam Berger and Rabbi Daniel Epstein, with the support of The London Jewish Forum, Maccabi GB and the London Borough of Barnet.

You can read the full leaflet [here](#).

# LEARNING FROM LOCKDOWN

**The past 20+ months have been challenging for all of us; in a variety of ways. How we experienced Covid-19 and lockdown run the spectrum of human experience. And so will our ability to recover and rebuild. For some of us it feels like the pandemic is over and the world has gone back to normal. But for others of us Covid-19 continues to colour our everyday experiences, impacting our physical and mental health. As we begin 2022, it's important to acknowledge and normalise differing reactions to post-pandemic life. There is no one size fits all here or timeline to finding our feet in the 'new normal'.**

Covid-19 has made many of us acutely aware of how life can change in an instant. It's taught us to live in uncertainty and to manage frequent change. There are important life lessons that we can learn here. By learning from our experiences of the pandemic we can build our resilience. What can we take forward with us? Learning from the past year to build a new future for ourselves.

## **Pace Ourselves**

In periods of change it's important to pace ourselves giving us time to acclimatise and adapt. We all have our own pace. So, it's important not to compare our ability to change with those around us. A gradual approach to a new situation can protect our wellbeing.

## **We are Resilient**

Covid-19 was a curve ball. It knocked many of us off the path our lives were taking. Creating obstacles many of us never considered having to cope with. It impacted almost everyone's physical and mental health to some degree. And yet, we adapted to the changing world around us in ways we never thought we would, or even could. We problem-solved in a daily, weekly or monthly basis on a scale many of us have never had to.

## **Connection is Valuable**

Pre-pandemic it was easy to take our community or connectivity for granted. We underestimated the importance of having people around us. Of feeling a part of something. It's vital that we rebuild and retain these connections going forward. We thrive as humans when we work with others. We are greater than the sum of our parts. Not only because we maximise our potential to achieve and pool our resources, but because as humans we need the opportunity to socialise. To speak and be listened to. To have people around us with whom we can share our thoughts, feelings and ideas.

### Take Time to Process

Whether big or small, we all need to process what happens to us and there is no fixed timeline for this. We can't rush ourselves. Instead, we need to normalise everyone taking their own time to work out their thoughts and feelings about their experiences of Covid-19. Not only are timelines for processing individualised, so is the way we process. Some of us may prefer to process alone. Perhaps taking time to think or channelling our thoughts creatively through writing, art or music. Others will prefer to process with others. Whether that's with a group or one to one, with friends, family, colleagues or a medical professional.

### Reach Out for Support

Lastly, whatever our post-pandemic experiences, it is important to be mindful of the impact this change may have on us and be kind to ourselves. Part of this is taking things slowly, investing in self-care, knowing our limits and checking in with our mental health. How are we finding things? What is difficult or easier than expected? Are we ready to push ourselves or do we need to take a step back? And most of all, do we know where to turn if we need support?



## WHERE TO GET HELP WITH YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

If you or someone you know needs mental health help there are a variety of options depending on the issue of concern.

- **Jami Qwell** – free, safe, anonymous mental health counselling and online support, from the UK’s leading online mental health platform. To find out more go to [qwell.io/jami](https://qwell.io/jami)
- **SHOUT** – 24/7 crisis text service – Text **Jami** to **85258**
- **Jami** is here to help with mental health support: [jamiuk.org/get-support/referral](https://jamiuk.org/get-support/referral), call **020 8458 2223** or email [info@jamiuk.org](mailto:info@jamiuk.org)
- **Ring your GP or out of hours service for an emergency appointment**
- **Contact your Community Mental Health Team (CMHT) if you have one**
- **Samaritans** – Call Samaritans on Freephone **116 123** (24 hours a day)
- For young people under 35, or if you are worried about a young person, please call **Papyrus** – a charity which runs the **HopelineUK** – on **0800 068 41 41**, text **07786209697** or email [pat@papyrus-uk.org](mailto:pat@papyrus-uk.org)
- Call **999** or **NHS Direct** on **111** (England) or **0845 46 47** (Wales)
- **Jewish Helpline** on **0800 652 9249** (Sunday – Thursday 12:00 – 00:00; Friday 12:00 – 15:00)
- Don’t hesitate to call **999** in mental health emergencies



## CONVERSATION STARTERS

**We all have mental health and it is just as important as our physical health. Starting a conversation about mental health is an excellent way to challenge the stigma and to get people thinking and talking about their perceptions of mental health and mental illness.**

**We have put together some suggested conversation points that can be discussed over a Friday night meal, Shabbat lunch or even a pre-Shabbat Zoom!**

1. Is mental health an important issue in your community? How does the community support our mental health or influence the way we think about it?
2. How do you think that discrimination and prejudice may impact a person's mental health and wellbeing?
3. How does society view mental and physical health differently? Do you think the two should be addressed in the same manner? Why or why not?
4. What do you think can be done to break down the stigma that surrounds mental health?
5. How has emerging from lockdown impacted your mental health, whether positively or negatively?
6. How important is prioritising self care? What do you like to do to practice self care and how much time do you put aside to do so?

# MENTAL WELLBEING AND JUDAISM

The sources below can be used as a starting point to discuss how mental wellbeing fits into religion and culture. How does Judaism recognise the importance of looking after ourselves? What ideas from Judaism can we use to boost our wellbeing?

You may want to think about other textual sources or ideas in Judaism which support wellbeing e.g. trying to use technology less or not at all over Shabbat can boost our mental wellbeing by giving us a break from screen-time. This gives us time to maximise face-to-face communication or focus our time on other hobbies and activities we enjoy.

## A Valuable Lesson

"It is long past time for us all to break the silence and speak openly about mental illness. It is time for this last stigma to fall and fall quickly in the recognition that we are all created b'tzelem Elokim (in the image of G-d)" – Rabbi Nathaniel Helfgot, 2001

A key part of education is leading from the front. Just by educating about mental health we are raising awareness that we all have mental health and we need to look after our wellbeing to maintain it. We are role modelling the importance of looking after ourselves and teaching a valuable lesson.

## Do we have the concept of mental illness in Judaism?

### *Prayer for the Sick*

Refuat Ha'Nefesh, V'refuat Ha'guf / Healing the soul and healing the body

Judaism shows us a connection of healing the soul and healing the body; there is no division between mental and physical illness. There is only illness. Likewise, everyone has both physical and mental health which changes over time and needs looking after.

## Does Judaism help?

"The support individuals derive from the members, leaders and clergy of religious congregations is widely considered one of the key mediators between spirituality and mental health. Spiritual or religious support can be a valuable source of self-esteem, information, companionship and practical help that enables people to cope with stress and negative life events" - Mental Health Foundation, The Impact of Spirituality on Mental Health.

Religion and culture can provide us with a sense of community and belonging. Within these communities we know that there are people we can turn to and trust when we need them.

## How does Judaism help?

### *Pirkei Avot 1:6*

Aseh Lecha Rav, V'Kneh Lecha Haver

Make for yourself a Rabbi (teacher) and acquire for yourself a friend.

We all need someone to talk to sometimes. Whether we turn to a Rabbi or Rebbetzin for guidance or a friend for support. Most of us will have a community, family and friends who we can turn to.

### *Parshat Va'etchanan 5:12*

Shamor et Yom HaShabbat

Keep (Guard) Shabbat

However we choose to mark Shabbat, Judaism recognises the need to "switch off" from our busy lives and reconnect with those around us. Whether we find comfort in or feel connected to familiar routines and rituals or choose not to use technology for a while, these are great ways to boost our mental wellbeing.

# GUIDELINES FOR SHARING LIVED EXPERIENCE

If you choose to tell your story on The Jami Mental Health Awareness Shabbat here are a few suggestions to help you stay in control of what you share.

## SPEND TIME ON THIS

Think about which parts of your story you wish to share and write a first draft. Put that away for a couple of weeks and then revisit it. Have you opened up about experiences that actually feel too raw to share with others? Can you make some edits and tweaks?

## KEEP IT SIMPLE

A human story simply told has the power to grip an audience and capture both hearts and minds.

## EXPERT BY EXPERIENCE

You are an 'expert' on your lived experience, don't forget that.

## SET BOUNDARIES FOR QUESTIONS

Decide what you are prepared to answer questions on and what you will not discuss.

People are naturally curious and their questions may feel too intrusive. So, decide if you are prepared to take questions after your talk. There may be areas that you do not wish to answer questions on. Some speakers for example who talk about their experience of eating disorders make it clear they are not prepared to answer questions about their weight or what they eat.

## BE PROUD

Sharing your story is a courageous act. By sharing your account you will inspire those who listen who also identify with lived experience of mental illness and educate and inform others.

## REFLECT

Give your talk to a friend or relative and reflect on how telling your story makes you feel. Then imagine telling the same story to a room full of people. It will feel different, so if anything felt too triggering or made you feel vulnerable in front of one person, think about how you might feel in front of others.

## MAKE FINAL EDITS AND PRACTICE

We suggest that you write and rehearse your story several times before it gets a public outing.

## PERSONAL STORIES

There are many online resources where people share their personal stories via video or on a blog which our communities can access. For example, Time to Change and Mind both provide real life personal stories which can be found here:

[time-to-change.org.uk/personal-stories](https://time-to-change.org.uk/personal-stories)

[mind.org.uk/information-support/your-stories](https://mind.org.uk/information-support/your-stories)

## LOOK AFTER YOURSELF

Whenever we're taking on something big it's important that we make time to look after ourselves. Think about who you may want to spend time with or chat to after you've given the talk. Perhaps there's an activity or hobby that you really enjoy and would like to do. It's great to plan ahead with this to ensure you have the time to unwind.

## YOUTH MATERIALS & IDEAS

**This range of fantastic resources has been developed for use by teachers and youth leaders in the run up to the MHAS as well as throughout the year.**

We hope these activities can support you in how you educate and talk about mental health with young people.

These resources can be used to develop your understanding of how a range of factors can contribute to young people's wellbeing.

We have provided you with practical examples of age appropriate activities to promote wellbeing in young people which will work in both formal and informal education settings.

# GUIDELINES AND TIPS FOR SPEAKING TO YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

## Why Do We Need to Talk About Mental Health with Young People?

- Rates of probable mental disorder increased between 2017 and 2021 in 6 to 16 year olds from one in nine to one in six and in 17 to 19 year olds from one in ten to one in six. (NHS Digital, 2021).<sup>1</sup>
- A variety of stress and pressures on young people, including social media and technology, can affect their ability to cope and impact possible mental health issues.
- We know that most adults living with mental illness experienced their first mental health problems at a young age. In fact, 50% of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by the age of 14 and 75% by the age of 24.<sup>2</sup>
- If young people know that support is available for their mental health and they know where they can get this support, we help build the foundations for a better future.

## How Do We Talk About It?

- We need to use boundaries when working with groups of young people. Setting out the aims for our conversations about the subject can help us stick to these parameters. Our aims for these sessions may be:
  - To raise awareness about mental health as something that affects us all
  - To encourage people to talk to each other rather than isolating themselves
  - To encourage the young person to seek help when they need it. If you broke your ankle you would not wait to see if it could get better on its own. We should take the same approach with our mental health
  - Use a 'light' voice when talking about the subject. If we convey anxiety or seem uncomfortable with the information, we give the impression that this is a hard or 'heavy' discussion

## Key Points to Educate Young People on Mental Health:

- We all have mental health just as we all have physical health.
- Mental health is about the way we feel about ourselves and the world. Our feelings and thoughts are part of our mental health.
- No one can see inside our head, so we need to tell people how we feel.
- When our feelings and thoughts seem to be out of control or worry us we need to speak to a trusted adult. We may decide to speak to someone we know well and feel comfortable with such as a parent or carer, grandparent or other family member or a school counsellor or teacher. There are also charities such as ChildLine and Young Minds where we can speak to someone anonymously.
- We can get help to get better when experiencing mental health problems.

## How Do We Look After Our Mental Health?

- Talk to our friends and socialise with people who make us feel good about ourselves.
- Make sure we get enough sleep and enough food to eat (we need to look after our minds as well as our bodies!).
- Social media can be a great way to socialise and films and TV can help us unwind but we do need to take regular breaks. We also need to be aware that light from phone screens and laptops or computers can interfere with a good night's sleep.
- Hobbies such as team sports, walking the dog, listening to music or expressing ourselves through art or writing can make us feel better and distract us from life's stresses.
- It's okay to speak to an adult we trust about how we feel.

<sup>1</sup> NHS Digital, 2021

## PRIMARY SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

# SMILE ACTIVITY

*Suitable for Year 1+*

**Ask everyone to think about one thing that makes them smile.**

**Ask who would like to share what makes them smile. They can also say why it makes them smile if they want to.**

**Ask why do we like to smile or make other people smile?**

### **Option 1 (Shabbat Appropriate)**

Put out pictures of lots of different things that might make the children happy. For example, friends, animals, smiles, the sun, toys, yummy foods.

Make sure you have multiple of each picture in case more than one young person wants to use it.

Give each child an envelope/box or bag and ask them to put a few pictures into their new smile box. If you don't have an envelope/box or bag, you can ask them to choose their pictures and think about where they might put them so they can see them often or to keep them safe.

Remind them that they can always think about the things that make them smile or look in their smile box. This can be useful if you are having a day that is making your face frown or looking a bit sad. We all have those sorts of days sometimes and it is important to let our teachers, friends and parents or carers know.

### **Option 2 (Use art materials)**

Provide art materials and paper that are age-appropriate for your group to use.

Encourage everyone to draw a few things that make them happy.

You can print off some of the ideas in option 1 to help prompt or remind them what they thought about at the start of the activity when we asked them what made them smile.

### **For Older Kids:**

If your group are older primary school children, you can ask them to create a smile poster to help make other people smile that can be helpful to them especially if they are having a difficult day.

## PRIMARY SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

# SELF-CARE BINGO

*Suitable for all years*

**Self Care Bingo is a great activity for primary school / year 7 pupils to get them thinking and talking about what they've done recently to look after themselves. It could be spending time outdoors, listening to music or trying something new.**

### **Aims and Objectives**

To encourage young people to compare and discuss with one another what they do for their own wellbeing.

### **Instructions**

Explain to your pupils that you are going to play bingo with a twist!

Give everyone a self-care bingo card and a pen.

Each pupil should walk around the room and ask one another "what do you do for self-care"?

If someone's answer is on the sheet, write their name in the appropriate box and if not, write their idea at the bottom of the bingo card.

You can only ask each person once.

Keep playing until either a line or the whole page is completed.

### **Time required:**

Approximately 30 minutes.

### **Resources required:**

Bingo cards and pens.

## RESOURCES: SELF-CARE BINGO

ATE SOMETHING DELICIOUS	DID SOMETHING I'VE BEEN PUTTING OFF	MADE A HEALTHY FOOD CHOICE	SPOKE TO SOMEONE I TRUST	TOOK A NAP
SAID 'NO' TO SOMETHING WHEN I WAS BUSY	PRACTISED MINDFULNESS OR YOGA	PLAYED A GAME	WATCHED A MOVIE OR TV SHOW	MADE A TO DO LIST OR ORGANISED SOMETHING
LISTENED TO MUSIC	MADE A GRATITUDE LIST	PAMPERED MYSELF	VOLUNTEERED MY TIME	GOT CREATIVE WITH ART MATERIALS
TOOK QUIET TIME	SPENT QUALITY TIME WITH SOMEONE I LOVE	TRIED SOMETHING NEW	EXERCISED	HAD A HOT DRINK
READ A BOOK OR MAGAZINE	SPENT TIME OUTSIDE	WENT TO BED EARLY (ISH)	TOOK A RELAXING BATH	CUT MYSELF SOME SLACK

## PRIMARY SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

# WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

*Suitable for Year 5 and 6*

### Part 1:

1. Tell the group you would like them to complete the sentence 'mental health is...'
2. Use the range of adjectives listed below. You can stick these around the room or put them on pieces of paper on the floor. If you are using an online platform, put the words on a PowerPoint slide and share your screen.
3. Ask everyone to either pick an adjective up or pick one that completes the sentence.
4. Invite them to say why they chose it if they would like to.
5. When everyone who wants to speak has had their chance, explain that mental health is how we think, feel and behave in the world.

Adjective suggestions for completing the sentence:

**Important**

**Necessary**

**Good**

**Scary**

**Bad**

**Misunderstood**

**Confusing**

**Interesting**

**Healthy**

**Boring**

### Part 2:

1. Use one or both examples below to illustrate how our thoughts and feelings can change how we behave

- Ask them 'If you were all really noisy today and I wanted you to be quiet, how might I feel?'
- When they say something like cross/angry/sad, ask them: 'Am I more likely to be nice to you and choose something fun to do, or might I be a bit more strict with you?'

OR

- If you are watching TV and someone comes in and changes the channel, how might you feel about that?
- When they say something like annoyed/angry/upset, ask them: 'Are you more likely to politely ask for them to change it back, or might we raise our voices and shout or try and change it back ourselves?'

2. Explain that this shows how our mental health is important because it can change how we think and feel and that will change how we behave towards those around us.
3. Use this as an opportunity to let them know that if they are not feeling good about something, instead of acting in a certain way we need to tell an adult we trust how we are feeling. No one can read our minds, so we need to tell people how we feel so they can help us.

## RESOURCES: WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

Important	Necessary	Good	Scary	Bad
Misunderstood	Confusing	Interesting	Healthy	Boring

## SECONDARY SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

# SELF-CARE CONVERSATION

*Suitable for all years*

1. Share the quote: **“You can’t pour from an empty cup”**.
2. Ask the group what their initial thoughts or reactions are?
3. Then ask if they think it is relevant to what we know about self-care or their age group in terms of self-care?
4. Acknowledge that at times it can be hard to prioritise looking after ourselves. This may be because we are very busy managing lots of pressures on our time. Or it may be because we find ourselves trying to help other people so it’s hard to find time to look after ourselves.
5. Remind them that we all need to look after ourselves otherwise our batteries will run out. We all feel better when we are recharged.
6. In pairs, ask them to think about one thing they do for self-care and one thing they’d like to try out.
7. Ask the pairs to share back.



## SECONDARY SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

# WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

*Suitable for all years*

1. Ask everyone to complete the sentence 'Mental health is...' with an adjective of their choice.
2. Go around the room and ask people to share the adjective that they would use.
3. Share some key messages about mental health as follows:
  - We all have mental health just as we all have physical health
  - Mental health is about the way we feel about ourselves and the world
  - Our feelings and thoughts are part of our mental health
  - We need to look after our mental health, just as we would look after our physical health
  - We can support our wellbeing by doing things we enjoy or help de-stress us
  - No one can see inside our head, so we need to tell people how we feel

OR

1. Ask everyone to complete the sentence 'Mental health is...' using a twitter format.
2. Ask them to consider what is the most important message about mental health as tweets have limited characters.
3. Encourage them to include hashtags.
4. If you have whiteboards or pieces of paper/pens this is a fun way to do it. Or you can ask people for their thoughts or if you're online to share them in the chat function.
5. Share some key messages about mental health as above.



## SECONDARY SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

# MYTHBUSTING MENTAL HEALTH QUIZ

*Suitable for all years*

### Part 1:

Put your groups into teams, depending on how many young people you have there may need to be more than two teams.

Ask them to pick a team name.

Tell them that you will read a mental health quote to them and they will need to answer true or false.

Agree a way for the teams to answer, this could be hands up, a buzzer if you have one, a noise each team will make or someone from the team standing up.

If they get the answer right they are awarded a point.

If they can explain why or give more accurate information they will get an extra point.

After each myth is 'busted', use some of the key messages in the resources to provide more information.

You may want to think of a fun way to keep score, this can be done by keeping a score board or by assigning sweets/beads/buttons to each team: one per point.



## SECONDARY SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

# MYTHBUSTING MENTAL HEALTH QUIZ

*Suitable for all years*

### Mythbusting Mental Health Quiz

(with key messages about each quote for you to share after each question)

**Only some people have mental health – FALSE**

We all have mental health in the same way that we all have physical health. They both need looking after as they can impact each other.

**Our mental health changes over time – TRUE**

Our mental health is always changing and will go up and down. Sometimes big life events or stresses may cause it to change. Other times it could be a build up of lots of little things in a short time period which impact our mental health.

**I can look after my mental health – TRUE**

This is the concept of self-care. There are things that we can do to help boost our mental health which can make us more productive and motivated and give us more energy. One of the most important forms of self-care is talking about our thoughts and feelings with a trusted adult. Part of looking after our mental health is also getting support from a medical professional if we are worried about our health.

**We shouldn't talk about mental health – FALSE**

It's really important that we talk about mental health. By speaking about it we teach others to do the same thing too. When we talk about mental

health we help combat stigma where people may not fully understand mental health and therefore treat people differently. It also helps highlight how important it is that we look after our mental health and get support if we need it.

**Mental health is as important as physical health – TRUE**

Our mental health and physical health are equally important and make up our overall wellbeing. When our mental health isn't as good as it could be it might start to affect our immune system so we're more likely to pick up a stomach bug or a cold. If our physical health needs a boost it may start to impact our mental health and we may find our mood becomes lower or we become more stressed.

**Mental health isn't the same as mental illness – TRUE**

We all have mental health but we don't all have a diagnosis of a mental illness. It is thought that in this country 1 in 4 British adults experience at least one diagnosable mental health problem in any one year and 1 in 8 of 5-19 year olds had at least one mental disorder when assessed in 2017.

## SECONDARY SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

# MYTHBUSTING MENTAL HEALTH QUIZ

*Suitable for all years*

### **Stress won't impact my mental health – FALSE**

Stress is one of the areas of our lives which is most likely to impact our mental health. If we think about the times when our mental health might have needed a boost it's likely to be during times when we were stressed possibly during exam season or when we had a deadline. If our stress levels are increasing and we're finding it difficult to manage it's important that we talk to a trusted adult about it. They can help us think about ways to manage our stress and having someone to talk to can also be good stress relief.

### **I shouldn't go to my GP about my mental health – FALSE**

Our doctor is the right person to go to if we have concerns about our mental health. They are there for both our physical and mental health because, as we've seen, they are connected. A GP can help us think about who we can talk to or some self-care options and if needed refer us to other professionals for further support.

### **Mental health can affect how I feel – TRUE**

Mental health is all about how we think, feel and behave in the world so it is linked to how we feel. Our thoughts and emotions can be an indication of our mood and the state of our mental health.

### **My mental health can affect my physical health – TRUE**

When our mental health needs a boost or our stress levels are high we may experience changes to our physical health. This is most likely to be headaches or aches and pains from being tense and stressed. Or being more likely to pick up a cold or stomach bug.

### **Part 2:**

After the quiz ask the group why it is important to mythbust around mental health?

If needed, you can prompt them by thinking about where we get our mental health information and if it is always accurate?

If needed, suggest the group discuss the answers in pairs or smaller groups before sharing back their thoughts.

As a whole group, think about what might happen if information is inaccurate? For example, people may not know where to get help, people might not look after themselves, stigma may increase, etc.

## SECONDARY SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

# MENTAL HEALTH INFLUENCERS

*Suitable for Year 9+*

1. Divide the students into small groups.
2. Assign each group one of the mental health influencers, which can be found in the resources below.
3. Tell them they will be taking part in a debate to find the most influential mental health influencer.
4. They will have 10 minutes to discuss in their teams why their influencer has contributed the most to mental health and raising awareness.
5. One by one, each team will have 3 minutes to pitch their argument to the other groups.
6. Let them know that when they have 30 seconds left of their pitch you will raise your hand to warn them.
7. At the end, everyone has one vote but they can't vote for the person they pitched for. You can do this by raising of hands, writing the name on a piece of paper or ticking a name off on a piece of paper ballot style.
8. Count the votes and announce who was voted the most influential mental health influencer
9. Open up the discussion about why it is important that we still educate and raise awareness about mental health?
10. Ask the group if they think this has improved of recent years and if they think we still need influencers for mental health and why?
11. Finish off the discussion by asking if influencers need to be high profile like the people we discussed? Help them think about what we could do to raise awareness.

## RESOURCES: MENTAL HEALTH INFLUENCERS

### OLLY ALEXANDER



Appearing on The Surgery back in January, Years & Years' Olly Alexander spoke out about feeling like he couldn't tell anyone about his bulimia and self-harming. "All throughout school I really struggled with mental health problems, loads of different things, and I never told anyone," he said. "Never told my mum. And I think, looking back, it began to eat away at me. I wish I had talked sooner."

Now, Olly knows the importance of speaking up, after seeking help from a therapist. "Today and for the rest of my life I think I'll be using the tools I've learnt from medical professionals, from what I've learnt from therapy, from what I've learnt from friends and talking about things."

### KRISTEN BELL



In an interview with The Off Camera Show, Veronica Mars star Kristen spoke out about her anxiety and depression, and how nobody should feel shame over taking medication to control their mental health.

"I got on a prescription when I was really young and I still take it today and I have no shame in that because my Mom had said to me, 'If you start to feel this way, talk to your doctor, talk to a psychologist, see how you want to help yourself,'" she said.

"If you do decide to go on a prescription to help yourself, understand that the world wants to shame you for that, but in the medical community, you would never deny a diabetic his insulin."

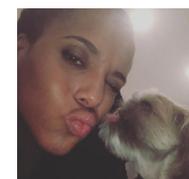
### DWAYNE 'THE ROCK' JOHNSON



Appearing on an episode of Oprah's Master Class, Dwayne – who suffered from depression in his early 20s – emphasised the importance of not hiding or being ashamed of mental health issues.

"I found that, with depression, one of the most important things you could realise is that you're not alone," he said. "You're not the first to go through it; you're not going to be the last to go through it... I wish I had someone at that time who could just pull me aside and [say], 'Hey, it's gonna be okay. It'll be okay.' So I wish I knew that."

### KERRY WASHINGTON



Speaking to Essence magazine in 2009, the Scandal star talked about her unhealthy relationship with food and compulsive exercising.

"I used food as a way to cope - it was my best friend," she said. "I'd eat anything and everything, sometimes until I passed out."

"But then, because I had this personality that was driven toward perfectionism, I would tell people I was at the library, but instead go to the gym and exercise for hours and hours and hours. Keeping my behaviour a secret was painful and isolating. There was a lot of guilt and a lot of shame."

Kerry went to therapy, after being approached by her dance teacher about her eating disorder, and continues to see a therapist – as well as a nutritionist – to help her communicate her feelings instead of using food as a crutch.

## SECONDARY SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

# MENTAL HEALTH IN THE NEWS

*Suitable for Year 9+*

### Part 1:

1. Show the group the different newspaper headlines which are reporting about mental health, in the resources below.
2. Ask them to suggest what the story behind the headline might be. They can work in teams to do this or as one big group.
3. You can prompt the discussion by asking:
  - what do we think the story is?
  - what does it tell us about mental health?
  - do we think it is a positive/negative headline?
4. Once the headlines have been discussed share with the group what the story actually is - it might not be what we thought.
5. Acknowledge that headlines can be misleading, especially if we only see headlines and don't read the full articles.
6. Ask the group what might be the impact on people reading these headlines? Do they get the full story? Is it easy to misinterpret or misunderstand what's being said?
7. Ask the group to consider if the articles were stigmatising in any way e.g. encourage a negative perception about mental health or those with a mental illness? What might be the impact if the media is promoting or sharing inaccurate or harmful information?

### Part 2:

1. Ask each person to create their own media headline.
2. The headline could reflect something about young people's mental health which they think the general public should know.
3. If needed, start a discussion on what they, as young people, think adults should know about young people's mental health or the pressures or experiences of young people in the 21st century. They can use these ideas to create their headlines.



## RESOURCES: MENTAL HEALTH IN THE NEWS

### **NHS staff taking 3.5 million sick days for mental health problems**

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/nhs-staff-mental-health-sick-coronavirus-a9617806.html>

### **Mental health services brace for surge after coronavirus**

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/coronavirus-mental-health-nhs-uk-patients-demand-a9666411.html>

### **Prince William tells Peter Crouch it's not weak to share your feelings**

<https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/royal-family/prince-william-mental-health-peter-crouch-podcast-interview-duke-cambridge-a9642321.html>

### **'It all crumbled': pop stars on mental health in the age of Covid**

<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/aug/24/it-all-crumbled-pop-stars-on-mental-health-in-the-age-of-covid>

### **Study finds half of 16- to 24-year-olds hit by 'lockdown loneliness'**

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/jun/08/study-finds-half-of-16--to-24-year-olds-hit-by-lockdown-loneliness>

### **Teens' anxiety levels dropped in lockdown - study**

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-53884401>

### **Public discussions about Kanye West have largely ignored his mental health — that's a mistake**

<https://www.insider.com/kanye-west-mental-health-social-media-bipolar-ethics-coverage-kim-2020-7>

# CONVERSATION STARTERS

## *Suggested activity for University Students*

Starting a conversation about mental health is an excellent way to challenge the stigma and get people thinking and talking about their perceptions of mental health and mental illness.

Here are a few suggested conversation points relevant to University Students.

1. What are the main concerns students have around their mental health?
2. Do you think Covid-19 has made students more or less aware of their mental health and self-care?
3. How supported did you feel moving from Secondary School to University? Where did the support come from?
4. How can universities better support the mental health of their students?
5. What tips would you share with new/incoming students about looking after their mental health on campus?



# STRENGTH CARD ACTIVITY

## *Suggested activity for University Students*

University life is full of new opportunities to learn and have new experiences both in and out of the lecture theatre. This learning can help us develop and uncover strengths and transferable skills which will help us in all areas of our lives, as we move on from university life and into the workplace, further education, volunteering and with our relationships and self-development.

We know that acknowledging our strengths can help boost our confidence and self-esteem, whilst learning and having new experiences can boost our mental health and wellbeing.

To help you identify the strengths you already have and the ones you'd like to develop, try out our Strength Card Activity.

Look at the list of strengths provided or cut them out and spread them out on the table or floor.

- Ask everyone to think about three strengths they have. Give people the opportunity to speak about at least one strength they choose.
- Then, ask everyone to think about two strengths they would like to work on. Give people the opportunity to say why they would like this new strength for university life.
- Finally, ask everyone to think about one strength the person on their right has. Invite everyone to say why this person has this strength and why it is so valuable.

## RESOURCES: STRENGTH CARD ACTIVITY

Coherent	Well-Prepared	Flexible	Confident
Charismatic	Knowledgeable	Dynamic	Concise
Understanding	Skilled	Genuine	Open
Enthusiastic	Good Leader	Active Listener	Friendly
Calm	Thoughtful	Creative	Open-Minded
Respectful	Humorous	Personable	Intelligent
Holds Boundaries	Patient	Organised	Focused
Inclusive	Authoritative	Encouraging	Accessible

# YOUNG ADULTS

## IN COLLABORATION WITH YOUNG JAMI

Being open to talking about our mental health and listening to others can help us maintain a positive state of wellbeing and help to break down the stigma that surrounds mental health. Continuing these conversations is more important now than ever.



Bringing light to mental health

# YOUNG ADULTS

## IN COLLABORATION WITH YOUNG JAMI

### CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. What do you think the main concerns are facing young adults today in relation to their wellbeing?
2. What have you found most challenging about the pandemic? i.e. stresses with: redundancies, furlough, working from home, lockdown, lack of socialising (in and outside of work), living with family/flatmates.
3. How have you practiced self-care during the pandemic?
4. How do you think employers can better look after the mental wellbeing of their employees?
5. What role does a healthy lifestyle play in the prevention of mental health problems in young people?



# WELLBEING BALLOON DEBATE

## *Suggested activity for Young Adults*

There are many different ideas about types of wellbeing or wellness. For this activity we will be looking at the 5 Ways to Wellbeing from the NHS, which you can find on Page 7 of the Toolkit. This activity can be carried out in the workplace with colleagues or socially in a group setting.

- For the balloon debate divide your group into 5 separate groups and assign each group one “Way to Wellbeing”.
- Let them know that their job is to advocate for why their way to wellbeing is the most important for their mental health. To prove this, they will need to include examples of how their way to wellbeing could be achieved.
- The debate should be structured with short opening remarks, a maximum 5 minute pitch and a few minutes for questions from the other side. If possible, have someone to referee the debate and keep time.
- Allow your groups at least 10 minutes to prepare for their debate. When everyone is ready, groups take it in turn to debate with each other. The winner of each debate goes onto the second round until there is one winner.



**You can use some of the following ideas about the 5 Ways to Wellbeing and prompts to help your groups get started.**

### **1. Connect with Other People**

We know connection and community are vital for our mental health. Good relationships can boost our mental health by fostering a sense of belonging and building confidence. It also helps us create bespoke support networks which we can rely on when we need them.

- How can we connect with others in and out of the workplace?
- What support networks are available in the Jewish community?

### **2. Be Physically Active**

Physical activity is important for both our physical and our mental health. It can help us build confidence and self-esteem. It can also challenge us in a positive way and motivate us to reach our goals. We also know that it can be an important form of self-care and help boost our mood.

- Does physical activity provide us with the opportunity to socialise and interact with others? What are some examples of this?
- Are there other aspects of physical activity that can boost our wellbeing?

### **3. Learn New Skills**

Being involved in meaningful activity can provide us a sense of purpose which is vital for our mental health. Likewise new skills can increase our problem-solving skills and encourage us to be creative. It may also boost our self-confidence when we find success at something we previously found challenging.

- What avenues for learning can be found within our workplace?
- How can we use our hobbies to support our wellbeing?

### **4. Give to Others**

Those who volunteer and give to others report higher levels of wellbeing. It can help us feel connected and foster a sense of community. It can create a sense of reward and provide us with a sense of purpose too.

- How can we support one another within our community?
- How does volunteering give us a sense of purpose?

### **5. Pay Attention to the Present**

Mindfulness is all about being in the present moment. We know that for many being more mindful can improve their wellbeing. By being more mindful we can boost our mood by being able to enjoy the present moment more fully. It may help us understand ourselves and those around us better too. By being mindful we may be able to slow down and approach challenges in a more thoughtful way too.

- How can we encourage each other to be more mindful?
- What options for mindfulness might exist within our workplace or community?

# SERMON

## Rabbi Shalom Morris, Bevis Marks S & P Synagogue

Among the plagues there was one that was fundamentally different than the rest. While in most of the plagues something happened, in only one of them did nothing seemingly occur. The plague of darkness wasn't so much an active plague, as it was simply the absence of light. So what was the plague? The Torah states that during the plague a person could not even see their friend for three days (Exodus 10:23). According to Ibn Ezra, people did not leave their homes. In other words, it was a plague of loneliness, where people became isolated from one another.

No doubt, this describes many people's experience during the pandemic, either when people were obligated to isolate during lockdown, or even voluntarily afterwards out of fear of getting sick. Many couldn't gain strength from the company of others, but instead were left to cope on their own. It was during this time that phone calls, text messages, and Zoom classes became people's lifelines, as a way to connect with friends, family and community. In many respects this remains the case.

Of course, we know that many people can experience this sense of isolation even when we aren't in a pandemic. They aren't necessarily isolated physically, but experience loneliness when compelled to cope with life's challenges in silence, without the support of those who care for them. Sadly, when we most need friends and family, we can often turn inwards out of an unnecessary sense of shame or pride. This becomes a self inflicted plague.

The plague of darkness reminds us that going it alone is a form of suffering. In one instance Maimonides councils a person to live alone, when the alternative is the negative influence of others (Mishne Torah, Deot 6:1). But it is clear that he only does so as a matter of last recourse. We are social creatures and require the company of others to live our best selves. The Torah states, 'It is not good for man to be alone (Genesis 2:18).' We all need friendship, companionship, and community.

Joining with others isn't a sign of weakness, but a show of strength. When we are with others, not only do we benefit, but so does everyone else around us, as we lift each other up.

In the Jewish tradition a house of worship is called a "Bet Keneset," which literally means a house of gathering. Jewish prayer is meant to be conducted in a group (minyan), not alone. When we go to synagogue we are meant to join with others in prayer, lifting each other's spirits heavenward. God is 'glorified in multitudes' in the words of King Solomon (Proverbs 14:28). The Jewish spiritual ideal isn't the life of the hermit, but the friend, the member of society. As the Talmud says, 'O' Chavruta O' Mituta,' friendship or death (bTalmud Ta'anit 23a).

While one would never call the pandemic a blessing, it is the Jewish way to always look for lessons from life's experiences and challenges. For many people Covid taught them how important connection is to their well-being. More than Covid has weakened people's bonds with synagogue, I believe it has strengthened their appreciation of it and how it is a place where we share life's ups and downs with our community, and gain strength or consolation through participation in it.

It has also reinforced our shared social responsibility towards each other, reminding us to make sure to check in with those who might be struggling or living in isolation. More so, it's taught us to care for each other's mental health and wellbeing, as we all now know how difficult it is to cope with life's challenges when we are on our own, or keeping feelings hidden.

That being said, when we are in need it is important that we don't wait for someone to call us, but to take the initiative to reach out to others to let them know we need help. There is no shame in needing the support of others, we all do. If we didn't realise that before, we all know that now. So let's all grasp this moment in time to deepen our connections with each other and with our communities, for all of our benefit and care.

# SERMON

## Rabbi Dr René Pfertzel, Kingston Liberal Synagogue

'Let my people go', said Moses to Pharaoh. 'Let them be free to worship our God and to find their true calling by leaving these narrow places (*hb. metzarim*) of Egypt (*hb. Mitzrayim*)'. The story goes, Pharaoh hardened his heart - and when his resolve weakened, God intervened and hardened Pharaoh's heart further -, leaving no other option for God than inflicting plagues that grew harder and harder. The penultimate plague, darkness upon the Land of Egypt, opened the door to the climax, the death of the firstborns, as if the authors of Torah wanted to hide this crime behind a cloud of night. Our Talmudic Sages felt unease about this treatment of the Egyptians because of the sin of one person, and they decreed that in future generations, we should take a drop of wine out of our glasses when we retell the story of the Exodus during the Seder of Pesach.

God said to Moses, 'Stretch out your arm toward the sky that there may be darkness upon the Land of Egypt, a darkness that cannot be touched'. And Moses did as God commanded him, and 'a thick darkness descended upon all the land of Egypt for three days' (from Ex. 10: 21 - 22). This darkness cannot be touched; it is a darkness that lasts some time. It is not the simple cycle of night and day, of darkness and light that was set in motion in the first verses of the Book of Genesis. It is a darkness that comes almost by surprise when our inner light is dimmed.

Abraham ibn Ezra, one of the most distinguished scholars of the 12th century Spain, wrote, "there are times when a thick darkness comes over the Atlantic Ocean during which time it is impossible for a person to distinguish between day and night. And this lasted sometimes for five days. I myself have been there many times" (commentary *ad. loc.*). Abraham Ibn Ezra was a keen traveller, and he went as far as Baghdad. Surely, he spent some time on the shores of the Atlantic and may have witnessed a thick fog over the waters. But when he said, "I've been there myself many times", what phenomenon is he alluding to? Is it a window open into his inner life?

Let us pause a moment and reflect on this sentence, "I've been there many times". Many of us say, "I've been there many times"? Darkness is an integral part of the human experience. Being human is not easy. We grow, we change, we age. We face many challenges during our life: how to make a livelihood, relationships, losses. When she lost Prince Philip, her lifelong partner, the Queen said, "grief is the price we pay for love". We cannot avoid the sufferings of life. However, we can choose how we respond to it. As the Persian poet Rumi once said, "this being human is a guest house, every morning a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary comes as an unexpected visitor". Life is a long learning curve that comes with many challenges.

But sometimes, these emotions overwhelm the mind. We cannot escape the impenetrable darkness that can linger for a long time. And sometimes, external circumstances add to the daily struggles, and reveal all that is fragile in us as individuals, but also us as a community.

The Covid crisis has unveiled many flaws and cracks in our societies, among them the lack of mental health support for those who need it the most, the huge division between those who can afford private mental health care and those who have to wait for help from a largely underfunded public system. Mental Health has come to the forefront as a major issue for our country.

What can we do?

The answer is both personal and collective. Pharaoh's stubbornness led to the ultimate plague, the death of the firstborns of Egypt. He was blinkered, lost sight of any other possible solution. He resembled the oak of the fable "The Oak and the Reed" by Jean de la Fontaine: overconfident and unable to measure the magnitude of the incoming storm. The reed showed adaptability, resilience, and when the storm came, the reed bent, but did not break. Pharaoh should have been like the reed and been open enough to see the darkness coming. This would have allowed him to avoid this overwhelming darkness.

When we are in the dark, the first step is to have the courage to say like Ibn Ezra, "I've been there many times". But for that, we need safe spaces, like Jami for the Jewish community, where we can find the strength to look at our frailty and to start the process of lifting the darkness that is upon us. It is our collective responsibility to help those in need, and our personal duty to be brave enough to admit, "I need help". Words can free us when they are received with a compassionate heart.

# SERMON

## **Rabbi Naomi Goldman, Kol Chai Reform Synagogue**

The Egyptians had faced months of difficulty and uncertainty. The world felt more chaotic than it has ever been. They had already faced the threat of disease, and climate change with dramatic hailstorms. Now locusts were causing a food shortage by eating everything in sight. It was impossible to plan; the recent outbreak of boils were still causing children to get sent home from school. It all felt hopeless. And so a thick darkness fell, a darkness that could be felt. And nobody saw anyone else or left their home for three days.

The timing of Mental Health Awareness Shabbat, on Shabbat Bo, is inspired by the account of the ninth plague of darkness, as a metaphor for depression, but rarely has the account of the Egyptians' plight felt more relevant than this year. We know that the pandemic and lockdowns of 2020-21 took a huge toll on mental health, particularly among young people.

We are still going through the emergence from lockdown, the adjustment to a new normal, and in many ways, this is just as hard a process, because we are all emerging at different speeds. Some of us are still shielding. For others life has gone back to normal. And all of us are, I think, a little traumatised by the experience of living with extreme uncertainty. We can make plans but we know that they might have to be jettisoned if there's a new outbreak. Everything feels provisional, unsettled.

For those of us who already have a tendency to anxiety, these are anxious and difficult times. All mental health services have seen a significant increase in demand, particularly from children and young people. A recent survey by NHS Digital showed that one in six children in England in 2021 had a probable mental disorder, facing loneliness, problems eating and sleeping and missing school. The plague of darkness was particularly bad because it wasn't isolated. It came after eight other plagues wore down people's resilience, creating a climate of fear and disruption that left the Egyptians feeling paralysed.

We can't always keep the darkness at bay even in good times. Sometimes we have to learn to live with depression or other kinds of mental illness, but we can always choose how to respond, how to manage our mental health and the mental health of those around us, how to be kind to each other.

These are, however, particularly hard times and we need to look out for each other more than ever. In Parshat Bo, we hear that the Israelites, by contrast with the Egyptians, had light in their homes. They weren't stuck in suffocating darkness. What might that light look like for us?

In the Talmud (bBava Batra 14b) Rav Yosef teaches that brokenness can be holy too. Moses put the broken fragments of the first tablets of law in the ark together with the new ones that he carved. We do something similar when we break the matzah on Seder night and put one piece aside for the Afikoman to be hunted after dinner. We can't continue the seder until we have brought together the broken pieces and then eaten them. The broken fragments imply that our dark moments, our broken

selves, are no less central to our relationship with God than our best moments, that the most difficult parts of ourselves are as loved as the shiny parts.

I think that's the light that protected the Israelites. It's about accepting and acknowledging that we are all a little broken, that we can allow light through our cracks. The challenge of any relationship, whether it's with a person, with God, or with ourselves, is to acknowledge that every part of us is central to that relationship – including our depression, our anxiety, our challenges around mental health. That's the first step in moving away from the darkness and into the light. We are human, so we are not perfect - and we are complete in that imperfection.

The broken fragments are put in the ark, and the Zohar, the foundational text of Jewish mysticism, teaches that the Ark is a symbol for the human heart. And that a person's heart must be a little broken if it is going to serve as a home for the Shechinah, that part of God that lives inside us. Because, the Zohar says, the Shechinah only dwells within broken vessels.

We have all been through a very tough couple of years. For those of us who already have mental health issues it's been particularly difficult. But our task as Jews is to nurture the light within us by acknowledging that we are all vulnerable, we're all finding this hard and we all need each other. And that is how we'll get out of the darkness toward the light.

## SERMON

### Rabbi Joel Levy, Edgware Masorti Synagogue

In this short D'var Torah I want to think about the way that people with mental health problems are treated. I am going to look at how the rabbis of old radically re-thought the humiliating treatment of those infected with tsara'at in the bible, shifting their community away from fear and expulsion and towards acceptance and compassion.

ספר ויקרא פרק יג  
(מה) וְהָצְרוּעַ אֲשֶׁר בוֹ הַנֶּגַע  
בְּגָדָיו יִהְיוּ פְרָמִים וְרָאשׁוֹ יִהְיֶה פָרוּעַ  
וְעַל שָׁפְּם יַעֲטֶה  
וְטָמֵא טָמֵא יִקְרָא :

#### Leviticus Chapter 13

(45) And the tsaruah who has the affliction, his clothes shall be torn and his head bare, and he shall put a cover upon his upper lip, And he shall cry, "unclean, unclean".

In the Tanach, when an Israelite is declared by a priest to be tsaruah, often mis-translated as leprous, his or her appearance is immediately altered to warn the un-afflicted, s/he must dwell outside the limits of the camp and s/he must shout out "unclean, unclean". Rashi captures the stark meaning of this cry: "he must proclaim aloud that he is unclean, so that people may keep away from him" (Sifra, Tazria Parashat Nega'im, Chapter 13 7; Mo'ed Katan 5a). According to the p'shat (simple meaning) of the Torah, there are afflictions that the community must be protected from, that are too dangerous either physically or emotionally to allow the pure and the impure to mingle. The afflicted must bear the brunt of their suffering alone, or with other sufferers, in the camp of the drowned. The bible treats tsara'at as an infection from which people need to be protected.

This understanding of tsara'at was radically overturned by the rabbis. They did not think that tsara'at was infectious but rather saw it as an external manifestation of a spiritual malady. Armed with this new understanding, how would they deal with the biblical verse above requiring the community to self-distance from the tsaruah?

In Masechet Sotah (32b) there is a discussion reflecting on whether a person needs to confess their sins aloud, revealing their disgrace to the whole community. One clear saying in the name of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai holds that **"a person must recount... what is to his discredit in a loud voice"**. In other words, in confession a person's sins must be announced to the whole community to allow for everyone to accommodate both the sin and the atonement. This statement accords well with the kinds of extreme positions taken by Rashbi elsewhere in the tradition, but the editors of the Talmud are so affronted by the harshness of Rashbi's position that they decide to actually re-write his statement as: **"a person must recount... his suffering in a loud voice"** and then, in an even

more astounding act of re-reading, they justify this revision by re-casting our “tamei, tamei” text from Leviticus as a call for compassion:

**בבלי סוטה דף לב/ב  
כדתניא  
וטמא טמא יקרא  
צריך להודיע צערו לרבים  
ורבים מבקשים עליו רחמים**

**Talmud - Masechet Sotah 32b**

As it has been taught:

**“And he shall cry, unclean, unclean” (Lev. XIII, 45)  
[the tsaruah] must to make his suffering known  
to the community**

**And the community seeks mercy for him.**

The tsaruah’s cries of “unclean, unclean” are reworked by the rabbis not as a warning to flee, “run from me for I am infectious”, but as an obligatory cry for help by the afflicted which imposes an obligation on the listener to offer help and compassion; “run towards me for I am suffering!” This exquisite reframing turns the cry “tamei, tamei” into an appeal for compassion, not fear.

From this the Talmud derives a general rule, that:

**...וכל מי שאירע בו דבר  
צריך להודיע לרבים  
ורבים מבקשים עליו רחמים**

...everybody to whom a calamity has occurred

Must make it known to the community

And the community seeks mercy for him.

Approximately a quarter of UK adults will experience a mental health problem in any given year. Times are changing and many more people are now likely to report their distress to someone else, but mental illness can still carry a degree of stigma; people can still turn from the mentally ill as if they are infectious. It can still feel as if recounting mental distress is like having your clothes torn, your head bared and being forced to cry “unclean, unclean”.

This rabbinic reframing away from the idea of infection has huge implications. The mentally ill need to know that when they reveal their suffering their listeners will move forwards in compassion rather than backwards in fear. In the rabbinic tradition when you hear someone crying “tamei, tamei” – it means that they are outside, alone and frightened; and the right response is to move towards that person and to offer them love and support. If that compassionate response is guaranteed then the rabbis feel free to say that the sufferers themselves are obliged to reveal the depths of their suffering in public. In a properly functioning compassionate society there is an obligation on the person to reveal their suffering, and a concomitant obligation of the part of the listeners to respond appropriately. There is a correct choreography to revelation and response.

The rabbis were brave enough to utterly revise the simple meaning of our holy Torah when necessary. They believed that the ultimate call of the Torah is to serve the Good, not the literal meaning of the Torah’s words. That belief requires systemic exegetical courage. Creating a world where those who are struggling can really speak out also requires courage; courage on the part of the listener, and even more on the part of the speaker.

# SERMON

## Rabbi Joel Kenigsberg, Magen Avot United Synagogue

Darkness can come in many forms.

There is physical darkness – such as that which occurred in the penultimate of the Ten Plagues. For several days the Egyptians were engulfed in a reality in which they could not see even their closest surroundings. At its peak they could not even move.

And then there is a darkness which envelops the mind, even when surrounded by broad daylight. A darkness which pervades one's emotions and intellect, which precludes the ability to think clearly, a darkness that finds its expression in feelings of confusion, uncertainty and inner turmoil.

Perhaps it is precisely this latter form of darkness that the Jewish people themselves experienced through the bitterness of slavery long before the plagues began.

In last week's Torah portion we read how when Moshe first approached Bnei Yisrael with the great tidings of redemption their response was underwhelming:

וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה מִקְצָר רוּחַ וּמֵעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה

“but they did not listen to Moses due to shortness of breath and hard labor”

(Exodus 6:9)

They did not listen because they were unable to hear. They were in a state of emotional darkness that did not permit them to look to the future. One could understand that the words *kotzer ruach* refer to a literal shortness of breath due to their backbreaking labour. Or perhaps, as the great commentator Rabbi Chaim ben Attar (Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh 1696 – 1743) suggests, that they refer to a narrow and constricted mind; to an inability to process those words due to a state of mental confusion – brought about as a direct result of the impossible circumstances in which they found themselves.

Over the past 2 years so many amongst us have been shrouded in darkness once again. Continued isolation has served to exacerbate already existing mental health challenges. How can we now move from darkness back to light? How can we improve the plight of our friends, neighbours, colleagues and fellow community members as we become increasingly aware of the strains on mental health that the pandemic has wrought on us all?

In her book about facing adversity and building resilience – “Option B”, Sheryl Sandberg discusses classic experiments on stress – where people were required to perform tasks such as problem-solving that required concentration, whilst simultaneously being blasted with loud and disturbing noises. Participants began to make mistakes, and some gave up entirely. Researchers then provided a way to alleviate the stress - they gave some participants a button that they could press to make the noises stop. Predictably, those who had the button performed better on all the tasks.

A remarkable and surprising fact, however, was that not a single participant actually pressed the button. Simply knowing that it was there was what allowed them to remain calm and focussed. Sandberg concludes "When people are in pain, they need a button."

If we, as individuals and as a community, acknowledge that mental health is not taboo; if we ensure that we are there to listen - that can provide a button that so many desperately need. And if we are in need of that button, let us have the courage to press it. Initiatives such as the Mental Health Awareness Shabbat are there to make it plain for all to see that we as a society are willing to talk about mental health. That we are ready to drop the stigmas. That we have finally understood that nobody should suffer in silence.

Of course it doesn't end there - mental illness cannot cure itself. We should avail ourselves of the wonderful services within our community and encourage others to seek professional help where it is needed. But it begins with a listening ear, with a recognition that the challenges are real and with a commitment that we will do our utmost to come together to help solve them.

Going back to that plague of darkness, the Torah tells us about the Egyptians that

**לֹא רָאוּ אִישׁ אֶת אָחִיו**

"No man could see his brother"

(Exodus 10:23)

The Chiddushei HaRim (first Rebbe of the Ger Chassidic dynasty, 1799 - 1866) explained that far beyond a simple description of the darkness that occurred as a result of that plague, these words should be understood as a cause for the ultimate darkness in our world - when no man can see his fellow. When no one looks around at others, when each individual looks only at the "I" but is oblivious to the "you" and where all are left to fend for themselves - such an attitude can only create the darkest of places.

This Mental Health Awareness Shabbat let us pledge to banishing that darkness and replacing it with light. Let us commit to talk and to listen, to encourage and to be encouraged. Let us provide the help we are able to, and let us seek the help we need, safe in the knowledge that our community is willing and able to provide it.

Shabbat Shalom!

**JAMI MENTAL HEALTH  
AWARENESS SHABBAT**

**7-8 JANUARY 2022**

**Jami**

The Mental Health Service for our Community

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THE DATE  
FOR THE NEXT MHAS  
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