

# Sermon

## Rabbi Dr Margaret Jacobi, Birmingham Progressive Synagogue

This week's sidra begins in an enigmatic way, as G-d explains to Moses that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had known G-d by a different name, El Shaddai, and not by the name that was revealed to Moses, YHVH. The relationship between G-d and the Jewish people was entering a new phase and G-d would come to be understood in a different way, as an Eternal and mysterious G-d, who could not be fully known.

The rabbis understood the names El Shaddai and YHVH to represent different aspects of G-d. El Shaddai is sometimes translated as "G-d Almighty", powerful and sometimes destructive. On the other hand, YHVH, (which came to be pronounced Adonai) best translated as "The Eternal One" came to represent G-d's compassion and lovingkindness, as expressed in words which we recite during the High Holydays: "YHVH, the Eternal One, is compassionate and merciful..." (Ex. 34:6).

Later in the sidra, we read about the first of the plagues with which G-d afflicted the Egyptians. Throughout Egypt, the plagues struck everyone alike, rich and poor, innocent and guilty. We are just emerging from the plague of Covid, although it is not yet completely over. Like the Egyptians, we have all suffered. Whether the illness affected us badly or not, the stresses of the past few years have taken their toll, especially for those who were bereaved or suffer from 'long Covid.' Another group who have been particularly hard hit are teenagers, whose schooling and social life have been badly affected. We know that mental illness amongst young people has soared during and after the pandemic, when isolation

and uncertainty added to the stresses they already faced.

Now, we are facing a crisis of poverty which makes life incredibly difficult for those who are already the poorest. That, too, is taking its toll on our mental health and in the depth of winter gloom, many will suffer both physically and mentally.

Just as the plagues that afflicted the Egyptians took many forms, so mental illness can take many forms. It is not always a result of stress. Sometimes it can arise out of the blue in people who are seemingly well and happy. But it is made worse by the stresses we face. When life already looks bleak, mental illness can make it seem even darker.

At such times, if we have a conventional religious faith, it may give us strength. But G-d can also seem judgmental and we may even think that we are being punished – even if we do not know what we have done wrong. It can help to remember that G-d is YHVH, a compassionate and caring G-d. As Israel Mattuck wrote: "There are sorrows whose roots the sympathy of best friends cannot reach. There are burdens so heavy that no human being can help to lift or bear them... What must it mean to such people to know and to feel that One greater than any human being is there with as sympathy silent, but how tender.... One to whom a heart can pour out its torrents of bitterness without words. A Friend with the tenderness of a mother, and with an understanding that is infinite."

At the same time, whether or not we find the comfort Mattuck writes of, we also need human help. Despite greater awareness, mental health still carries a stigma. Jami, the charity which aims to increase awareness of mental illness and offer mental health support to the Jewish community, has designated this Shabbat as Mental Health Awareness Shabbat. The charity offers

support to people living with mental ill health, whatever form it takes. It also offers education to teenagers and adults. It helps us recognise and acknowledge when we are in need. It also helps us to learn about the best way to support those who are in need are suffering. In the book of Job, we learn that his friends came and sat silently with him for seven days and nights until he spoke. To support someone means to be with them, responding to their needs and being ready to listen. Words can be difficult and inadequate, but being there matters.

The Israelites did finally experience redemption. Although at first they could see no hope 'miktzer ruach – from shortness of spirit' – which we may understand as despair, they did in the end find light and hope. So we pray that all who are suffering from despair and hopelessness may find their spirit renewed. The Jewish prayer for healing asks for 'refu'at hanefesh u'refuat haguf – healing of the body and healing of the spirit'. This Shabbat may we reach out to those in need of healing of the spirit, so that the prayer may be fulfilled for all in need of healing that they may be healed.