

Sermon

**Rabbi Joseph Dweck, Senior
Rabbi S&P Sephardi**

“It is not what you look at that matters. It’s what you see.”

- Henry David Thoreau

In his book Musicophilia, Oliver Sacks writes about the way in which the human mind processes music. He describes the various pathologies of the brain that inhibit a person’s ability to appreciate music’s full impact. The brain employs many different areas of function in order to “hear” music. When just one of these areas falter, the music can be lost to the listener.

While those conditions are biological, Sacks records cases in which people, either through personal choice or as a result of psychological conditions, lose their appreciation for music. He indicated points in his life when he had, while experiencing depression, lost his own ability to enjoy music.

Similarly, at the beginning of Va’era, Moshe speaks to the Children of Israel of freedom, love, future and hope. We are told, however, that they could not “hear” him. Because of their workload, stresses and the pressures of slavery, they could not appreciate the great realities which were the music of Moses’ words.

Their inability to hear him was not because they intentionally disregarded him. On the contrary, it was due to “truncated spirits and difficult work”. They had lost their inner capacity to respond to the promises of love and hope.

It is important to recognise that so much of the quality of our life depends on our own inner ability to “appreciate the music”. Often we believe that our perception of a situation is the reality. However, we all have a lens through which we interpret what happens to us. That lens is the mind – the great “ear”

through which we hear the music of life – our most precious possession and the key to our freedom.

At some point in our lives, most of us will experience a level of anxiety, depression or other forms of inner darkness. It is important not to refrain from speaking about the challenges of our inner life, and from seeking help in dealing with them.

We must focus on this critical line in the parshah that tells us why the Israelites did not listen to Moses.

The Israelites’ mental health had been compromised and weakened as a result of relentless and meaningless labour, persecution and trauma. It was not that they did not care. It was that they did not at the time have the ability to take in the music. Their oppression and suffering was not only physical, but also mental and Moses had to liberate them from both.

Often, the story of the Exodus is as much about lifting the spirit as it is about liberation from physical confines. This teaches us that without the mind’s delicate and unfathomably complex ability to receive, the Israelites could not hear the call of hope and redemption that Moses was singing to them. Likewise, without well-nourished and cared-for minds, we will not grasp the music of our own lives that G-d is playing all around us. Paying attention to the maintenance of the mind - our “mental health” – is one of our most critical tasks, for every dimension of our lives.

This Shabbat we focus on our mental wellbeing and what we can do as a community to provide the resources and support necessary for those who struggle, and to heal the “stigma” attached to mental health. This Shabbat we are encouraged to pause and hear the Torah’s outcry to us to foreground mental wellbeing in our communal consciousness and dialogue.

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.

Sermon

Rabbi Robyn Ashworth- Steen, Manchester Reform Synagogue

“I can’t do it.” “I’m not good enough.” “Please, not me.” “They can do it better”. How often do these types of thoughts cross our minds? Thoughts of self-deprecation or judgemental, negative voices determining that we are less than. They act as an invitation into a darkness where our goodness and beauty are not to be seen. They also act as a red flag that our mental health may need attention – a sign that something is off balance and we are reacting in the only way we know how – to chastise ourselves. But what if there was another way of responding when these thoughts arrive? What if, instead of accepting the thoughts and adding to them, we chose another path – that of self-compassion and turning towards community? Of course, life is messy, often unfair and painful. We don’t have the privilege of simply choosing to be happy or turning negativity into positivity. But we can accept the messiness and the pain as being part of the human condition and bring compassion and community to the party of the many emotions we hold each moment. We can choose to prioritise our mental health without shame and judgment.

To help us explore this alternative path let’s turn to Moses. For rather than our spiritual teacher, father and ancestor being a perfect, saint-like role model for us, we see his humanity and our own. In Parashat Vaera, firstly, we hear the groaning of the Israelites – their pain given the circumstances of their slavery and the oppression they were under. Many times throughout the Torah we hear, alongside G-d, the crying of the Israelites and our ancestors. We hear Abraham weep following the death of Sarah. We listen to the deep darkness of Jeremiah’s struggle with his place and role. We sit alongside Job

as he screams out: “Why me?” Why do bad things happen to good people? We sit with Rizpah as she mourns for her sons. And we stand here alongside Moses as he also asks G-d, twice in this parashah - “Why me?” I can’t barely talk – let someone else lead the Israelites.”

In each of these modelling of humanity, we see a part of us. A real, messy, insecure emotional part. There is no pretence that life is anything other than complicated and through seeing our ancestors’ struggle, we are liberated to step into our own without judgment. Indeed, our very name, Israel, means, literally, one who struggles with G-d. We are strugglers – finding our way through our lives with all its pain and beauty. As the writer Glennon Doyle succinctly wrote:

I don’t think that I’m broken at all. I no longer think that I’m a mess. I just think I’m a deeply feeling person in a messy world.

We are not broken for feeling feelings. We are, as Doyle also writes, responding appropriately to a broken world. What Moses and all of our ancestors teach us is that we are never to blame for any emotion we hold. Emotions arise naturally in us. In it is our reaction to our emotions where we can cause further harm – these secondary emotions. We feel sad so we judge ourselves for not being able to be the happy person we feel we should be. We feel scared so we feel ashamed at not being strong enough. We feel angry so we separate ourselves from those around us to prove that we are unloveable. We turn our initial, human, natural emotions into something to beat ourselves with. We use them as weapons against ourselves to critique our worth and value.

What if, instead, we chose another way? In the parashah, straight after Moses’ first questioning of his own value, we read a

long list of tribes and their children, and the families of Moses and Aaron. Whilst this roll call feels like an interruption of the story, it is vital to it for it is a response to Moses' fear – “you are not alone – here is your community,” the text says.

Judaism recognises the struggle and beauty of living our lives and through prayer, law, custom and ritual it keeps insisting, in the words of Hillel, the 1st century sage, that we do not separate ourselves from our community. Yes, this is hard. Being with people when we are in pain is complex. But we also know that connection is the balm to moments of shaky mental health. Recognising that we are part of something bigger than ourselves and that everyone is putting one foot in front of the other – this is

vital to helping us to take that next step and find liberation. It moves us from me to we – from an individual suffering to a community of people who struggle, care and act for each other. We can then find our power and can recognise where, instead of individual blame, the broken parts of society mean our pain is inevitable and action is needed.

May we be able to find and step into community, wherever and whatever that means to us. May we turn to compassion rather than judgment. May we each find the courage to feel our feelings and turn from self-blame to action towards a better, more whole world for all.

Sermon

Rabbi Oliver Joseph, Masorti Judaism

וְגַם אֲנִי שָׁמַעְתִּי אֶת־נַאֲקַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
אֲשֶׁר מִצְרַיִם מַעֲבָדִים אֹתָם וְאֶזְכֹּר אֶת־
בְּרִיתִי: וְלִכֵּן אָמַר לְבְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲנִי ה'
וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מִתַּחַת סִבְלַת מִצְרַיִם
וְהִצַּלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם מֵעֲבָדָתָם וְגָאֵלְתִּי
אֶתְכֶם בְּזְרוּעַ נְטוּיָה וּבִשְׁפָטִים גְּדֹלִים:

EXODUS 6:5-6

I have now heard the moaning of the Israelites because the Egyptians are holding them in bondage, and I have remembered My covenant. Say, therefore, to the Israelite people: I am ה'. I will free you from the labours of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary chastisements.

SHEMOT RABBAH 6:4

וְעַל זֶה נֶאֱמַר: וְגַם הַקְּמַתִּי אֶת בְּרִיתִי, שֶׁנִּתְּנָה לָהֶם כְּמוֹ שְׁאֲמַרְתִּי לָהֶם שְׁאַתְּנוּ לָהֶם אֶת הָאָרֶץ וְלֹא הִרְהַרוּ אַחֲרָי. וְגַם אֲנִי שָׁמַעְתִּי אֶת נַאֲקַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, לְפִי שֶׁהֵן לֹא הִרְהַרוּ אַחֲרָי, וְגַם אִף עַל פִּי שֶׁיִּשְׂרָאֵל שִׁבְּאוֹתוֹ הַדּוֹר לֹא הָיוּ נוֹהֲגִין כְּשׁוֹרָה, שֶׁמַּעֲתִי נַאֲקַתָּם בְּעִבּוֹר הַבְּרִית שֶׁכָּרַתִּי עִם אֲבוֹתֵיהֶם, הַדָּא הוּא דְכָתִיב (שְׁמוֹת ו, א ג, יד): וְלִכֵּן ה': וְאֶזְכֹּר אֶת בְּרִיתִי. לִכֵּן אָמַר לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, אִין לִכֵּן אֶלְמָא לְשׁוֹן שְׁבוּעָה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (שְׁמוֹת ו, א ג, יד): וְשָׁבַעְתִּי לְבֵית עֲלִי, נְשָׁבַע הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא שֶׁיִּגְאֵלְם, שֶׁלֹּא יִירָא מִשָּׁה שְׁמַא מִדַּת הַדִּין יַעֲכֵב גְּאֵלְתוֹ. וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מִתַּחַת סִבְלַת מִצְרַיִם, אַרְבַּע גְּאֵלוֹת יֵשׁ כָּאֵן, וְהוֹצֵאתִי, וְהִצַּלְתִּי, וְגָאֵלְתִּי, וְלִקְחֹתִי. כְּנִגְדַּ אַרְבַּע גְּזָרוֹת שֶׁגִּזְרָ עֲלֵיהֶן פְּרַעָה. וְכִנְגְדוֹן תִּקְנֹנוּ חֲכָמִים אַרְבַּע כּוֹסוֹת בְּלִיל הַפֶּסַח, לְקַיִם מַה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (תְּהִלִּים קטז, יג): כּוֹס יְשׁוּעוֹת אֲשָׁא וּבִשְׁם ה' אֶקְרָא, וְהִבֵּאתִי אֶתְכֶם אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁאַתִּי אֶת יְדֵי, אֶעֱשֶׂה לָהֶן מַה שֶׁאֲמַרְתִּי לְאֲבוֹתֵיהֶן שֶׁאַתְּנוּ לָהֶם אֶת הָאָרֶץ וְיִהְיוּ יוֹרְשִׁין אוֹתָהּ בְּזִכְרוֹתָן.

“We are going to fix this.” “We are going to make this better.” That is the language of a good supportive friend, partner, parent or another person. The reality we know is that “getting better” or “fixing” any part of ourselves is in fact a long and often tough journey.

Our Parashat this week, Parashat Vaera, begins with the laying down of some of the plans for the Exodus from Egypt, the big and dramatic exit of the Israelite tribes from their slavery. G-d’s language is of reassurance to Moses that the Israelites will be freed from Egypt and released from slavery but the reality is that the journey is more complex than perhaps either Moses or G-d anticipate.

Ten plagues later and after lot of kvetching (trouble and strife) the Israelites finally get

released and then chased out of town.

There is a good model here in this Parashat for our own personal journeys to healing and recovery: first, call out; second, make a plan; third, carry out plan.

Start at the top. Crying out is the only way we can begin. When we are suffering, often-times, saying out loud that we are in tough times is the hardest and most frightening of steps. Sometimes, even when we say we are in trouble, it takes time for those around us to actually, clearly hear our words. Finding a way to tell those closest to us or support organisations like Jami about our trouble and our distress is a crucial step on a path to finding the support we need and better mental health.

The second part is making a plan. The exchange between Moshe and G-d is a dynamic exchange. Moshe is 'כַּבְּדֵנִי', cannot speak up with any ease and he is anxious about the mission he is assigned. G-d, too, has likely underestimated the scale of the project he has taken on, how tough Pharaoh is going to be and how unruly our Israelite people are going to be. Despite the challenges, a plan is laid out and like all best laid plans, they will be changed and adapted as you go. This too is the story of finding support and gaining strength; that often our immediate plan of action might actually not be the final plan that crosses us back into a world of good mental health and managing the pressures that our life presents. Our Parashat teaches us flexibility and adaptability as a core part of the journeys in our life.

The third part is Exodus, when we actually get there. We've done the work, our life is back on track, we are feeling healthier and more balanced out. It is here that celebration and storytelling come into play. It was Miriam and the Israelite women who went out of Egypt with musical instruments for celebration. They went out of Egypt with great faith that there would be celebration around the corner and they were not disappointed. The point here is how important celebration is. When we reach milestones, we must find even the smallest way to celebrate ourselves and mark progress. The Israelites knew this

and in the ark of Jewish history, this is what our festivals are there for. We are here, in strength, let's celebrate!

Our Passover Seder, which we will celebrate in the spring, embodies each of these parts. We retell this story of crying out, of journey and adaptability and of celebration. We double down on celebration by putting four cups on the Seder table which, too, mark the stages of this journey from slavery and suffering to freedom.

This Shabbat we are marking Mental Health Awareness Shabbat. In part this Shabbat is a celebration of all the work Jami is doing in our community. It is also an opportunity to share stories of tough times that each of us have faced individually, sharing some of our own journeys from darker to brighter days in the hope that more people who are struggling right now can cry out and say: "I am in a tough place". Talking about mental health has always been hard and for this reason it is on all of us to raise our awareness of how many people are in tough times at the moment and make clear that there is support for us in our Jewish community.

The journey is not simple but it is a path worth treading: cry out, speak up, make a plan, celebrate moments of strength and achievement on your path to better days. This Shabbat and going forward we are celebrating you and here in your support.

Sermon

Rabbi Dr Samuel Landau, Barnet United Synagogue and Clinical Psychologist

One of the most powerful things that I can do as a Rabbi is to hold another human being in mind. Some people think that the role of a Rabbi is to lead services, officiate at life events or be an inspirational teacher. While all those things are true, possibly an even greater impact someone can have on another's life is to send a short message, "I am thinking of you." Whether it is following an operation and checking on recovery, after a holiday and seeing whether the required level of relaxation was reached or simply knowing that someone has been facing a challenging time (as we all do) and seeing how today is going – this is the mark of a pastoral leader.

We do not have to look far within the Torah to see an example of this. Indeed, it is an account that fills the section of our Rosh Hashana prayers concerned with G-d's Zichronos – literally translated as, "Memory", referring to G-d holding someone else in mind. The person involved is Noah.

Put yourself in Mr and Mrs Noah's shoes for a moment. They had put themselves at odds with the society around them; holding onto ethics and values that the rest of the world had cast aside. With Divine guidance they had built an ark, gathered the animals two by two (or seven by seven) and been cast upon the open floodwaters. For 40 days and nights the sky was darkened with clouds and the little ark was hurled across the deep. Time passed, the rains stopped but still the waters remained and G-d did not offer an olive branch of hope. Mr and Mrs Noah may have felt lost, low and lonely. They may have felt helpless and hopeless. Then something happens:

וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת־נֹחַ וְאֶת־כָּל־
הַחַיָּה אֲשֶׁר אִתּוֹ בַּתֵּיבָה וְאֶת־כָּל־הַבְּהֵמָה אֲשֶׁר
אִתּוֹ בַּתֵּיבָה וַיַּעֲבֵר אֱלֹהִים רוּחַ
עַל־הָאָרֶץ וַיִּשְׁכּוּ הַמַּיִם:

Genesis 8:1

G-d remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark, and G-d caused a wind to blow across the earth, and the waters subsided.

The first thing that happens is that G-d remembers Noah. He is no longer alone.

What causes loneliness? (adapted from Mind)

Loneliness has many different causes, which vary from person to person. We don't always understand what it is about an experience that makes us feel lonely.

For some people, certain life events may mean they feel lonely, such as:

- experiencing a bereavement
- going through a relationship break-up
- retiring and losing the social contact you had at work
- changing jobs and feeling isolated from your co-workers
- starting at university
- moving to a new area or country without family, friends or community networks

Other people find they feel lonely at certain times of the year, such as around Rosh Hashana or Pesach.

The relationship between loneliness and mental health (adapted from executive summary)

In 2022, a government department commissioned an in-depth report into better understanding loneliness. It looked at the experiences of loneliness among those who had experienced a mental health condition.

Participants did not always describe themselves as feeling “lonely”. Instead they talked about feeling isolated, alone, or being a loner. Other ways in which participants talked about the lack of connection they felt in their lives was to describe not having anyone they could turn to for emotional support, or feeling like a burden on those they had existing connections with.

Across the sample there was a spectrum of experiences of loneliness. Those who were most lonely described feeling isolated, with no close friends or supportive others. Participants in this group tended to have depression and be in the middle-aged or retired life stages. At the other end of the spectrum, the least lonely people were those with a wider social network, including close connections who provided emotional support. Participants in this group tended to have experienced anxiety and depression and were found across all life stages. For this group, periods of loneliness correlated with poor mental health. In between these groups were people with a few close connections, and a small number of supportive others. However, these social connections were not always able to provide the level of support participants needed.

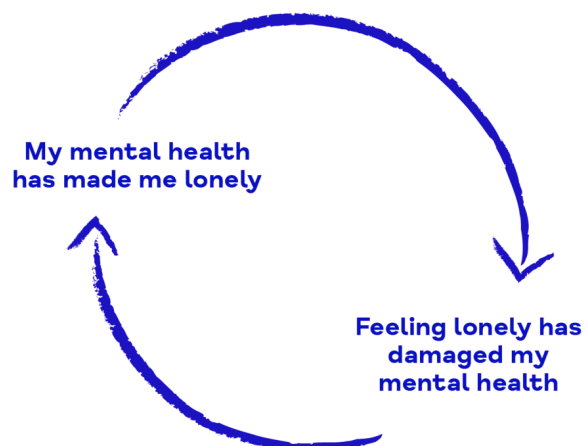
The relationship between loneliness and mental health was bidirectional and cyclical. Participants described the following ways in which mental health issues could lead to greater feelings of loneliness:

Mental health conditions reduced capacity for social interaction. Low mood could lead to feeling disconnected from others or simply feeling too exhausted to engage with others. Public spaces for socialising could also feel overwhelming.

Negative perceptions about themselves or others could lead to withdrawal. Mental health conditions were associated with feelings of low self-esteem and participants worried about the stigma they might experience if they revealed their mental health issues.

Not being able to share that they were struggling with others, and feeling the need to hide mental health symptoms for fear of being seen as a “downer” could also lead to feelings of loneliness. Maintaining a pretence of being fine when around others was exhausting and unsustainable for participants, leading to them withdrawing from social contact instead.

On the other side, loneliness could also lead to a decline in mental health. This happened where participants had more time alone to ruminate on negative thoughts; where they lost confidence in their ability to socialise, leading to low self-esteem; and where not talking about their feelings led to them feeling even more overwhelmed.



Loneliness can be hard, whether we are experiencing a mental health condition or not.

Rashi on the verse we mentioned earlier gives us a powerful insight into the feelings that Noah was experiencing. The typical way to read the verse is that G-d remembers Noah, holds him in mind, and so causes a wind (ruach) to blow that somehow dries the waters. However, this word can also mean 'spirit', not just wind. And that is the explanation that Rashi chooses:

וַיַּעֲבֵר אֱלֹהִים רוּחַ. רוּחַ תְּנַחֲמוּמִין וְהַנְּחָה עָבְרָה לְפָנָיו

AND G-D MADE A WIND (or SPIRIT) TO PASS —
A spirit of comfort and relief passed before Him.

G-d did not simply remember Noah. G-d cheered Noah up. He sent a spirit comfort. The Gur Aryeh explains that Rashi had to interpret the verse like this. If the translation was 'wind' and referred to an attempt to dry the waters, it would not work very well. Blowing at water simply causes it to spread from one place to the other. It does not make it dry. Therefore, Rashi had to understand a deeper message in this verse, that G-d came to cheer Noah from his low-mood and loneliness. It is a gentle and inspiring message.

Over the past few years, so many of us have felt lonely. The social isolation of Covid has hurt. Let's take a leaf out of G-d's book and resolve to do *one* thing this week differently. Let's resolve to pick up the phone to somebody that might need it and say, "I'm thinking of you".