



Mental Health Shabbat

We are delighted to partner with JAMI, the mental health service for the Jewish Community on this Shabbat on which we read the plague of darkness. JAMI are also running a Parent Café this Sunday, I am focussed on supporting parents managing children's anxiety, especially around the online world.

The Biblical plague of darkness is referred to with an extra word *Aphela*, alongside the standard term for darkness *Choshech*. It is a darkness, the Torah says, that is tangible in its consuming quality. In Midrash Tanhuma, Rav Abdimi understands the plague as paralysing, “An Egyptian who was standing was unable to sit, while one who was sitting was unable to stand, and one lying down could not rise.” The verses and their commentators feel as if they describe not so much a physical phenomenon, but a psychological one.

The paralysing, tangible quality of depression is, awfully, one I’ve seen and heard sufferers share. It is a lethal disease.

Peer reviewed, government supported actions include normalisation of depression as a medical condition, not a personal failure. As a medical condition it can and will respond to professional, medically trained intervention. “Lots of people experience these feelings. They can be addressed, speaking with a GP or medical health professional can help.” For many the combination of both medication and therapeutic support will be more effective than either in isolation.

Social connection and reducing isolation are also attested as a protective factor. This isn’t the same as telling someone who is experiencing depression that they should ‘cheer up.’ There will be many social spaces that a person experiencing depression will feel they need to avoid. I hope the Synagogue, however can be helpful. It won’t work for everyone every time. But if coming to Shul, sitting together or even sitting apart is ever helpful, I couldn’t be more proud to make it clear that this is, among so many other things, what we are here for. No need to schmooze, no need to come to kiddush. But part of the idea of a community is to know we are never truly alone. And if physically being the space doesn’t work, there’s the stream. And also ... me. I’m not a medical professional, but I have resources I can share and would both want to be know and show a sense of care that we all deserve.

As Rebbe Nachman shared, and it does seem that the great founder of Breztlav Chasidism experienced both mania and depression, the world is a narrow bridge, but the most important thing is never to give into fear.

May we all know only brightness.

Rabbi Jeremy