

Lech Lecha 5771: Shabbat of Wholeness, Holiness, and Wellness

Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, Congregation Rodeph Sholom

Master of the Universe, I am Yours and my dreams are Yours. I have dreamt a dream and I do not know what it is. Whether I have dreamt about myself or my companions have dreamt about me, or I have dreamt about others, if they are good dreams, confirm them and reinforce them... and if they require a remedy heal them... so turn all my dreams into something good for me.¹

In the days before therapists, when you dreamt a strange dream, you would stand in front of the priests and say these words. Not only that, but you would say these words while the priests said their blessing: *May God bless you and keep you...* And then, when the entire congregation said ‘Amen’ to the priestly benediction, they would say ‘Amen’ to the individual as well.

It’s a great model: Something is bothering you. You go for help. You get support.

Like all good models, it sounds much simpler than it is. Something is bothering you. *Me? Nothing bothers me.* You go for help. *I don’t need any help.* You get support. *That’s not for people like me. And besides, it wouldn’t work.*

It’s no secret that different cultures have different approaches to getting help, especially when what ails us is mental or emotional rather than physical. The most uncomfortable room I have ever sat in was an academic seminar in Oxford, where the guest scholar was a professor at UC Berkeley. In true California fashion, he started the seminar by talking about a conversation he’d had with his therapist about a dream. The British academics looked down at the table, shifted in their seats, and did the best they could to disappear. Now, we live on the Upper West

¹ Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 55b.

Side of New York City, which may well be the therapy center of the world. People often refer to their therapists in casual conversation. But for every person who is comfortable, there is at least one other person who is profoundly uncomfortable; there is at least one other person who might have a trainer at the gym and a specialist for every physical part of their body, but cannot imagine getting help with anything else.

The message of this sermon is not just to go to therapy: for some people, that's the right approach, for others, not. But it *is* to suggest that our minds, our souls, need care just as much as our bodies, and that just as we can experience episodes of physical illness, so too can we experience episodes of mental or emotional duress, above and beyond the stresses of daily life – above and beyond what we are equipped to deal with ourselves.

Dr. Mark Vonnegut, son of the author Kurt Vonnegut, recently wrote a memoir entitled *Just Like Someone Without Mental Illness Only More So*. In it, he observes: "I've had the bad luck to get sick four times and the remarkable good luck to get better again each time," he writes. "None of us are entirely well, and none of us are irrecoverably sick. At my best I have islands of being sick. At my worst I have islands of being well."²

It's a very relatable description; it reminds us that in many ways, there is no "us" and "them." When it comes to mental health, however, we often see the world in black and white: we know who the mentally ill are, and they are not us. That has implications for everyone on the spectrum of mental illness and mental health; it affects how we treat ourselves, yes, but it also affects how we treat others. The truth is, it's not always easy to relate.

Pastor Lisa Schubert tells the following story about her own struggle to relate:

² Review by Jim Higgins in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Oct. 13, 2010 (<http://www.sanluisobispo.com/2010/10/13/1326536/doctor-wryly-recounts-his-recurring.html>).

Samantha approached me outside the church on Thanksgiving morning with her hair disheveled and her coat covered with dirt smudges and rain drops. She demanded to borrow my cell phone to find if the Thanksgiving dinner she had requested from a charitable organization would be ready for pick-up in an hour. I was in a hurry. I needed to be inside preparing to lead worship. I begrudgingly let her borrow my phone, but I insisted on dialing the number myself and standing with her in the gentle rain.

Samantha issued commands to the person on the other end of line. When she hung up, the rant continued against our church, our staff, the weather, and this meal that would serve as her Thanksgiving dinner. I had to let her go mid-rant, but not before reminding her that I would keep her in my prayers.

My encounters with Samantha have continued over the past few months. She's almost always confused, angry and paranoid. She tells stories about growing up with another member of our staff, who never met her until recently. It's hard to know how to respond to Samantha.

It was raining again on Monday when I saw Samantha. She was sitting in the front lobby of the church. She shouted at me as I walked out the door, "Be careful out there! Two guys tried to kidnap me, and I wouldn't want that to happen to you." Unwilling to believe her, I replied, "Samantha, I'm sorry you had a rough morning. I'll be thinking of you. Hope your day gets better." I continued out the church doors and opened my umbrella.

I later discovered that Samantha was mugged that morning. Thankfully, the police believed her while I had blown her off. They arrested the alleged perpetrators that afternoon.

I'm embarrassed by my lack of gentleness and compassion toward Samantha, and I know I'm not alone... There are no simple answers, but I think the answer starts in a simple place: We stand with them in the rain.³

Let me turn now to a story from within our tradition. This week's parsha, *Lech Lecha*, was seen as an appropriate one when the UJA Federation chose this date as a special shabbat to raise awareness around issues of mental, emotional, and spiritual health. For the most part, I think they had the story of Abraham in mind, how in *Lech Lecha* God calls Abraham to a journey, and how we are all on a journey when it comes to the experience of, and the issues around, mental health. When I thought about it with a slightly sacrilegious eye, I thought: Perfect! Abraham hears a voice telling him to leave everything he knows, and he follows it. He rejects the reality around him, he uproots his family to follow a vision that only he can see, and the next time God speaks to him, God tells him to kill his son. It's hard not to wonder about Abraham's mental health. But there's a different story in the *parsha* that is compelling, and that is the story of Hagar.

Abraham and Sarah – at this point, known as Avram and Sarai – are childless. In desperation, Sarai gives her handmaid Hagar to her husband so that she can conceive. But when Hagar does in fact become pregnant, she acts badly towards Sarai, and Sarai abuses her. The commentator Rashi even suggests that Hagar miscarries as a result of Sarah's harshness. She runs away, and is alone in the wilderness when she encounters an angel of God. The angel says: "Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?" And Hagar replies: "I am running away from my mistress Sarai."

³ This story is on the NAMI website, which contains many valuable resources (http://www.nami.org/MSTemplate.cfm?Section=Standing_with_Her_in_the_Rain1&Site=FaithNet_NAMI&Template=/ContentManagement/HTMLDisplay.cfm&ContentID=98561).

I want you to notice something important. Hagar answers the question of where she is coming from. She does not say where she is going. I don't think this is because, like Abraham, Hagar is at the beginning of some great journey. I think it's because she's lost. I think she can't imagine a future for herself. I think she's suicidal.

I don't want to prettify the angel's response: he tells her to go back to Sarai, and the maltreatment that this return will entail. But it is, in its own way, an intervention: an intervention that saves Hagar. The angel tells her that she will have a son, and be the mother of her own people; the angel gives her hope. At that, Hagar does something that women in the Torah don't generally do. She calls God by a new name: El-Roi, "the God who sees me." And she names the well that is there "Be'er le-hai roi," the well of the life that sees me.⁴

Pastor Lisa Schubert stands with Samantha in the rain. The angel stands with Hagar by the well. Both stories share a message: people who are in anguish need to be heard. People who are in anguish need to be seen. They need a well to sustain them.

What then is the nature of that well? For some, it's therapy. For others, it's medication. For some, it's twelve-step meetings. For others, it's treatment of eating disorders. For some, it's treatment of dementia. For others, it's a suicide hotline. As much as we still on some level believe that it's possible for those who are mentally ill to talk themselves out of their illness, to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, to just get over it and get it together and get out of bed, those ideas are simply false. Those who are ill need Hagar's well, that place where they can be seen and heard and helped. The challenge is getting them to it.

⁴ Genesis 16:13-14.

Which is why all of us need a well: those who struggle with mental illness, and those who love them and struggle to support them. I would encourage everyone to take the resource guide which Shari Steinberg compiled, also available on our website.⁵ We need all the wells we can get.

We are thankfully past the days when people who died by suicide were not buried in Jewish cemeteries; we have realized that when someone is experiencing mental illness, they are under stresses beyond their control. And so we have lifted some of the stigma. But mental illness is still what some call a “no-casserole” illness.⁶ “Schizophrenia” and “bipolar disorder” and “depression” are whispered in our generation like “cancer” used to be. And this hurts not only those who suffer from those illnesses, but also those who live with them, also those who are related to them, also those who love them. They need our support throughout; sometimes over the course of a difficult relationship, sometimes in its aftermath, sometimes when they have tragically lost a loved one to an illness they didn’t even know that they had.

I want to be clear: the story of mental illness is not like that story which has gripped our imaginations this week, the story of the Chilean miners. It is not a story of an emergence from darkness to light, however painstaking and heroic. It is a story of moving back and forth between the two, sometimes over the span of an entire life. What I can tell you from officiating at funerals in which the deceased has had a history of mental illness, is that trying to find the well, trying to help someone find the well, does make a difference. It is not that there is a permanent and total solution. But there *is* value, there *is* heroism, in doing the best we can

⁵ www.rodephsholom.org

⁶ “The Daily Struggle of Mental Illness,” sermon delivered at Bet Shalom, April 28, 2000, anthologized in *Caring for the Soul: A Mental Health Resource and Study Guide*, edited by Richard F. Address, UAHC Press (New York, 2003), p.35. This guide was significantly shaped by a Rodeph Sholom rabbi, Sari Laufer, while she was a student at HUC-JIR.

with what we have. And part of the solution is to speak what has been unspoken, to see what has been unseen, and to hear what has been unheard.

The Talmud, after it describes the whole ritual and prayer to be said by the person who has dreamt a dream, the prayer by the person who needs help, concludes:

If one cannot manage to [to say all] this one should say: You who rule on high, who lives in might, You are peace and your name is peace. May it be Your will to bestow peace on us.⁷

Let us say what we can manage. Let us do the best we can. God who is peace, give us peace. Please join me in saying: Amen.

⁷ Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 55b.