

**Bo 5778**

## **The Plague of Darkness**

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The room was dark. Rabbi Eleazar was still in bed. His face turned toward the wall. He couldn't even bring himself to look toward the window at life and light.

Rabbi Yochanan entered the room. He looked down through the darkness at his friend. Rabbi Yochanan pulled a chair to the side of the bed and sat down. The rabbi prepared to sit in this heavy silence for a long time. His face reflected the darkness. But his hands and arms seemed to brighten the room with their own light.

Rabbi Eleazar turned from the wall to face his friend. Yochanan asked: Why are you crying? Is it because you didn't study enough Torah? Is it perhaps lack of wealth? Could it be that you regret not being a father?

Rabbi Eleazar looked into the darkness for another silent moment. Then he blinked at the brightness of Yochanan's crisp, white shirt; his gentle hands; the pale skin of his forearms.

Eleazar finally spoke: I weep because all light fades into darkness; because all beauty eventually rots.

After some time Rabbi Yochanan replied: On that account, you surely have reason to weep. They wept in darkness together.

Yochanan asked: Does darkness comfort you? Slowly, Eleazar shook his head: Maybe it did in the beginning, but it can't protect me from my thoughts.

Yochanan asked: And the silence? Is it comforting? - No.

And being alone? Eleazar looked into his friend's eyes. - No. No, loneliness adds to my suffering.

Do you continue to welcome this darkness, this silence, this sadness? - No. Before, I couldn't bear light, noise, or laughter. Now, I can no longer bear the alternatives. But I didn't dare to look for a way back to living.

Yochanan asked: Will you let me help you? - I will try.

Can I give you my hand?

Eleazar stretched out his hand. He felt light and life touch him. He felt strength and warmth reach him. His friend raised him out of his bed and helped him to the door.

The plague of darkness, which this story from the Talmud discusses, is maybe not so very different from the darkness that the Egyptians in our Torah portion experienced:

In the space of two verses, the Torah refers to “darkness,” *choshech*, three times, calling it “a darkness that can be touched” (Ex. 10:21) and “thick darkness” (Ex. 10:22) so oppressive that “for three days no one could move about” (Ex. 10:23). But in contrast, “all the Israelites enjoyed light in their dwellings” (Ex. 10:23).

A midrash in *Sh'mot Rabbah* suggests that the light, which the Israelites enjoyed, was shone from within, not from without—not from the sun nor from torches. By inference, we conclude that the thick darkness—darkness that could be touched—arose not in the heavens but in the internal mind-set of the Egyptians.

Today, we normally refer to this darkness as depression or mental health problems. Sadly, unlike the plague of darkness, which lasted three days, most people affected by poor mental health will have to learn to live with it all their life. And not only will they have to learn to live with their particular mental

health challenges but they also have to learn to live with the stigma associated with mental illness.

As the author and sociologist Thomas Scheff explains: "Those given psychiatric labels...are seen as different from others - weak and flawed, less capable and less competent, with undesirable characteristics such as dangerousness and poor grooming. Their opinions and feelings, presumed clouded by mental confusion, are not respected. [The stigma of] mental illness... casts doubt on the labeled person's ability to be a good parent, [friend,] spouse, employee, or even citizen." (Telling, p.13)

It is because of this stigma that many people do not feel comfortable to share their suffering with others. Sufferers of mental illness are afraid to be judged. They're afraid to be told: You just need to cheer up. You simply need to learn to control yourself. They're afraid to be asked: Why can't you just go get some exercise? Eat better? Take yourself less seriously? Family members of those who live with mental illness are also afraid to be blamed, judged, accused, silenced, or ignored.

But the truth is mental illness is pervasive. And people who live with mental illness deserve the same honour and respect we show toward anyone else affected by illness. Just like there is no shame in cancer nobody should have to be ashamed of a mental health diagnosis.

This is why we mark Mental Health Awareness Shabbat. We join other synagogues and faith groups across the country in educating about mental health and drawing attention to the challenges of destigmatising mental health. Many of you will have had the opportunity to listen to our wonderful JAMI guest speaker this morning. For some of you this will certainly not have been your first opportunity to learn from JAMI as we welcomed guest speakers in the past and hosted a mental wellbeing course run by JAMI last year at the synagogue.

In addition to drawing attention to mental illness, this Shabbat is also a wonderful opportunity to express our gratitude for the great work done by

third-sector organisations. We are grateful for the work of JAMI - The Jewish Community's Response to Mental Health – for their guidance, encouragement and inspiration in making mental health and its challenges a “healthy” part of our conversation about wellbeing and recovery. Like JAMI, charities such as MIND, Time for Change, MQ and others highlight the desperate need for more action to be taken to tackle mental health “Head On”.

And the members of NPLS clearly agree: with mental health being the number one topic of concern for our members, according to the voting on Yom Kippur.

In the next few months, we will be working through Harrow Citizens alongside other local faith and community organisations on improving mental wellbeing in our communities. If you would like to be part of the conversation, please join us on 30 January\* to learn more about what can be done locally.

But whether you can join our Citizens' activities or not, there is something very simple that all of us can do to make a difference in our community when it comes to mental wellbeing – treat yourself well and look out for others. When someone describes not feeling well don't dismiss it. When someone sneezes you say “bless you” and offer a tissue. Likewise, when you sense the darkness in a friend or family member, reach out to them. Like Yochanan in the Talmudic story of the beginning, you can share your light and life. It doesn't even require physical touch. By being there for someone, you might not be able to fix everything, just like the bless you and the tissue won't actually make the cold go away. But you can be a source of strength ensuring that nobody has to suffer alone.

So on this Mental Health Awareness Shabbat, may we all realise that we are each endowed with unique qualities to better our own lives and the lives of others, that together we can face an uncertain future with strength, resilience, humility, grace and – most importantly – hope.

\*Harrow Citizens Meeting on Mental Health – Tuesday 30 January– 6:45pm-8:45pm at St John Fisher RC Church Harrow, 80 Imperial Close, Harrow, HA2 7LW