

**Bo 5779**

## **Losing Sight of the Horizon**

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**12 January 2019**



### **Mental Health Awareness Shabbat**

A number of years ago, I had the opportunity to spend a night in a Bedouin encampment in the middle of the Negev desert. One of the most enchanting things about the experience was the darkness at night and being able to see the star-studded sky in all its glory. As a city dweller so used to constant light pollution, true darkness was a precious gift rather than a horrible plague as portrayed in this week's Torah portion. The plague of darkness, which the Egyptians in our Torah portion experience, is described very vividly:

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).

What is it about darkness that makes it a plague? Water turned to blood or pests of insects are obviously plagues but why darkness?

I think, surprisingly, we might be able to understand the plague of darkness better when we look at the rabbinic discussion of how one knows whether it is time to recite the morning *Sh'ma*. In Mishna Berachot (1:2), the rabbis suggest that the time for the morning *Sh'ma* has come when one can distinguish between blue and white, the two colours traditionally present in one's *tzitzit*. From this we learn that darkness renders difference indistinguishable, which on the other hand prevents us from observing the mitzvot and thus from telling right from wrong, good from bad. The fact that the rabbis choose the colours of the *tzitzit* as the measure for enough light breaking through the darkness is symbolic because they are supposed to remind us of the mitzvot.

But we don't have to just turn to the rabbis to understand the danger of darkness preventing us from seeing what is right and what is wrong, up or down. JFK jr tragically died alongside his wife and sister in 1999. Kennedy was a novice pilot. He was flying at night in the darkness, and his instruments were telling him which way was up, but he didn't trust them. The truth was right in front of him, and he couldn't see it. He lost sight of the horizon and nosedived, and by the time he realised what was happening, it was too late, and he couldn't pull up.

This well-documented phenomenon of pilots losing sight of the horizon is also a powerful metaphor for mental illness. This Shabbat the Jewish community marks 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 illness.

I shouldn't have to say it and yet it is important to say it out loud from the pulpit to remind us all: mental illness, or as more correctly described, poor mental health is nothing to be ashamed of.

As early as the first chapter of Genesis, we are taught that "there was darkness and there was light" and "it was good." Darkness precedes the light, without darkness there would be no light. All of us at all times are somewhere along that continuum of inner darkness and light. It's just that our baselines are not the same. But no matter what our baseline, we will experience times in our lives where happiness, joy and content lift us above our baseline, as well as face the challenges of being knocked off our baseline.

Churchill described his own depression as his black dog. Like a loyal pet, the depression accompanied him through life. This image resonates for me as it reminds us that whatever our mental health, wherever our baseline between darkness and light lies, we cannot simply shake out of it – the dog sticks around, even if it sometimes chooses to hide in the living room corner rather than following us around.

It is okay to acknowledge that, just like pilots, we might lose sight of the horizon for darkness exists alongside light. But like pilots, we need to trust instruments to help us navigate the darkness so that we won't be nosediving until it is too late. Sadly, pilots have access to much more sophisticated navigation aids than we do for navigating the darkness of our soul. But while we might not have readily available technological aids there are methods to help us not lose sight of the horizon.

The NHS has a wonderful resource entitled the "Five Steps to Mental Wellbeing." Evidence suggests that there are five steps that we can all take to improve our mental wellbeing. If you give them a try, you may feel happier, more positive and able to get the most from life or at the very least not lose sight of the horizon.

The first step is "Be Active" – it doesn't require going to the gym, a short walk once a day is sufficient as long as you make it part of your daily routine. Step two is "keep learning." Learning something new stimulates our brain and the satisfaction of knowing that you acquired a new skill will boost your confidence and sense of resilience. The third step is "Give to Others." In giving to others even the smallest act can count, whether it's a pound for the charity collection, a smile, a thank you or a kind word. Every act of giving can improve your mental wellbeing and will help you feel connected to others around you. Step four is "Be Mindful." Rather than floating through life like an aimless ship, try to be more aware of the moment. Take note of your thoughts, your feelings, your body and the world around you. This can help you to feel anchored even in the darkness and provide you with the confidence to approach new challenges. And finally, and in my opinion most importantly, "Connect." Connect with the people around you: your family, friends, colleagues, neighbours and fellow congregants. Spend time developing these relationships. Because in moments when you are about to lose sight of the horizon, the people around you can be your navigation aid. They might not always be able to dispel the darkness altogether but they can help you to navigate it. They can accompany you on your walk with the black dog.

Our community deeply believes in connecting to our members and connecting our members to each other. Our care team has spent the past year learning more about how to improve mental wellbeing and understand the causes and signs of poor mental health. A number of them will be completing mental health first aid training later this month so that they, alongside third-sector organisations like JAMI - The Jewish Community's Response to Mental Health – can provide the best support possible. Together with Harrow Citizens and thanks to

the hard work of our member Vanessa Berle, we created a signposting leaflet of all the places that can provide specialist support locally, which is available on the stand outside.

But it is not just our care team who can play an active role in supporting the mental wellbeing of our members. We can all do our part by treating ourselves well and looking out for others. So on this Mental Health Awareness Shabbat, may we reflect on our ability to be navigation aids for those who have lost sight of the horizon, may we celebrate the potential of our community to help guide us through the darkness, may we never forget that we have the power to bring in the light. As Martin Luther King jr put it: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that."

Amen