



Rabbi Joseph Dweck | Senior Rabbi

הרב יוסף דוויך | רב הראשי

Sermon for JAMI Mental Health Awareness Shabbat
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In the 2001 film "A Beautiful Mind", actor Russel Crow plays John Nash, a Nobel Laureate in Economics who taught at Princeton in the 50's. Some years later, Nash was invited to the Pentagon to crack encrypted enemy telecommunications. He considers his regular duties at MIT uninteresting and beneath his talents, so he is pleased to be given a new assignment by his mysterious supervisor, William Parcher of the United States Department of Defense. Nash becomes increasingly obsessive about searching for these hidden patterns and believes he is followed when he delivers his results to a secret mailbox. Sadly, the entire project that he believes he is involved with is only a hallucination – a symptom of his Schizophrenia. What is astonishing about Professor Nash, however, is that at one point he actually realises that he is hallucinating and notices that the people he is seeing and is afraid of, never age. Aware of his own hallucinations, he effectively pulls himself above his mental illness and, while the hallucinations persist, he is able to work at ignoring them, knowing that they are not real. He continues his research work at MIT over the next two decades and by the 1970's he is allowed to teach again.

The "beautiful mind" of Professor Nash was beautiful for one major reason: he was able to realise and acknowledge his own mental illness. In his case it was a severe psychosis and required a powerful self-realisation which most would not have the lone capacity to be conscious of. But we can nonetheless gain inspiration from the story for our own lives. There is a wide spectrum and various types of mental illness and challenges that can affect the human mind. From bona fide insanity to bouts of confusion and forgetfulness. Being that the conscious mind is an emergent property from the highly complex functions of the brain, it is to be expected that the flaws of its function are just as complex and nuanced. All of us, in some way or another, at some point in our lives are likely to experience quirks in our mental health. From obsession to depression, paranoia and anxiety, phobias and neuroses. We get sick mentally just as we get sick physically. No one is immune.

And whilst we certainly have a tendency to fear illness in general, the levels of fear and resistance that we have towards mental illness far outweighs those that we harbour for physical illness. The fear is crippling to us. The reason is fairly simple: mental instability makes us feel isolated, out of touch, apart from reality. It is a key reason why we hate being wrong. Even getting a piece of information incorrect is unsettling to us. When we realise we have gotten something wrong we feel that we have lost our footing in the real world and therefore, we've lost touch.

In order to live our healthiest lives, both mentally and physically, we must be bold enough to face when our mind is not working optimally. One's capacity to be aware of error in this regard not only completely disarms those around us, but also allows us the opportunity to address and fix it. If we do not know or acknowledge that there is something wrong, we cannot make it right. But the stigma of mental illness weighs down upon us. Because we fear facing it, either we or those we love suffer more by not gaining the vital requirements of therapy and healing that mental illness requires. This week, Torah teaches us, among other things, the dangers of not acknowledging negative neuroses.



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As Egypt crumbles under the weight of punitive divine plagues for their enslavement of the Children of Israel, Pharaoh, witnesses his country being reduced to tatters and the growing lack of confidence that the Egyptian people have for his leadership.

Pharaoh's courtiers said to him, "How long shall this one be a snare to us? Let the men go to worship the Lord their God! Are you not yet aware that Egypt is lost?!" (Ex. 10:7)

Yet, as the plagues pound Egypt, Pharaoh is exposed for refusing to respond to the consequences of his crimes. The beginnings of salvation come only when he begins to acknowledge that the real weight bearing down upon Egypt is that of his neurotic compulsions.

Pharaoh sent for Moses and Aaron and said to them, "I stand guilty this time. The Lord is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong...I will let you go; you need stay no longer." (ibid., 9:28)

Still, he is ironically, utterly bound and enslaved by his compulsion to keep the people of Israel in slavery and bondage. He cannot stop himself.

But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he became stubborn and reverted to his guilty ways, as did his courtiers. So Pharaoh's heart stiffened and he would not let the Israelites go.... (ibid., 9:35)

Pharaoh suffered from mental illness that was in fact perpetuated by God as punishment for his stubborn lack of *acknowledgement* that he had misjudged an important reality. Even after six different occasions of an attempt to bring him to recognise the flaws in his thinking and realise why God was demanding he recant, he refused to see it and accept it, and so he did not and could not act to rectify it. It is this very point over which God takes him to task as expressed in last week's reading:

*For this time, I will send all My plagues upon your person, and your courtiers, and your people, in order that you may know that there is none like Me in all the world. I could have stretched forth My hand and stricken you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been effaced from the earth.
Nevertheless, I have spared you for this purpose.... (ibid. 9:14-16)*

Unlike Professor Nash, no matter how many indications Pharaoh saw that reasserted the reality of his neurosis, he dug his heels into his mental breakdowns until he finally lost everything.

We have what to learn from Pharaoh this week, indeed, how we should *not* behave. Rather, the more we are open to acknowledging the true and various conditions of our mental health, the more we can allow ourselves to find the bravery necessary to face our own mental challenges and difficulties.

For many of us it may be like a cold or flu; there may be brief periods in our lives of mental illness or instability, or they may come and go, and in such times it is important that we nurse and nourish ourselves as we would if we were experiencing any other ailment. To do this, we must first face the spectre of mental illness and stare down its stigma.



We can also remember that many people who suffer from mental illnesses also exhibit extraordinary creativity. In fact, the two traits are often closely related. Consider the likes of painter Vincent Van Gogh, composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart or author Virginia Woolf, all of whom exhibited signs of mental illness. Some of the greatest spirits are deemed to be of unsound mind¹.

We are thankfully living in a time where the stigma is waning, and we are shining light on the once dark aspects of our psychological challenges. The UK is among the leading nations in this cause and it is quite positive that TRH Prince William and Prince Harry have nobly taken the mantle of leadership for it². The Jewish Community, as always, is at the forefront of this development and we are blessed to have JAMI as a robust service to help us treat and heal mental illness in our communities.

Torah teaches us that our human consciousness is born of God's very breath³. It is our greatest gift. When that gift is troubled, we must bring it to health to the extent that we can, knowing that mental illness is an endemic trait of the human condition and a derivative of the wonder, miracle and beauty that is the human mind.

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¹ See Hosea, 9:7.

² <https://www.headstogether.org.uk>

³ Gen., 2:7 and Rashi, ibid.