

**Rosh Hashanah 5777: “The Best of Times, The Worst of Times”**

Temple De Hirsch Sinai – October 2 and 3, 2016

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When Charles Dickens opened the novel “A Tale of Two Cities” with, “*it was the best of times, it was the worst of times,*” I am absolutely certain he was talking about **maternity leave.**

(Those in the room who have become parents ... you know exactly what I’m talking about.)

Yes, this past December Josh and I became parents to a beautiful, strong, amazing son. Avi is now nine months old and we feel profound gratitude every day to call ourselves his mommy and daddy.

It’s been quite an experience navigating life as working parents ... finding the energy and seizing the time ... to be fully immersed in the professional world ... and fully present with our beloved son. Josh and I have worked hard to find a rhythm ... but we certainly could not do it alone ... it really does take a village, doesn’t it?

For us, at least right now, we’ve figured out a small measure of that tricky, elusive work/life balance thing.

But the truth is, it took us a little longer to get there than most.

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One of my best friends, Adam, is someone I think would make a fantastic rabbi. During our freshman year at UC Davis I asked him, *have you ever thought about becoming a rabbi?* His answer: “No.”

He told me, “I don’t want to spend my life in a glass house.”

At the time, I didn’t get it ... I saw this career as immensely rewarding. I envisioned – as I still do – a beautiful fusion of the personal and professional. It felt natural to live in the spotlight ... and the benefits of a life in the rabbinate so outnumbered my concerns and doubts.

But ... after Josh and I welcomed Avi, in those early weeks ... that no one really talks about ... when you’re home on the couch, your hair unwashed, an infant screaming in your face ... struggling ... and *exhausted* ... it was hard not to imagine that glass house around us.

*What if someone from Temple ever saw us like this? I wondered. What if I run into a congregant at Target? How will I have an adult conversation – I won't have anything to say!* I dreaded the eventual return to work; terrified I'd forgotten how to do the job I love so much.

Becoming a parent was not an easy adjustment for me. Honestly, I don't think it's an easy adjustment for *anyone*. But something happened to me – Ms. Type A, ambitious young rabbi – shortly after our son was born.

In a time everyone told me should have been the happiest of my life, I was instead diagnosed with postpartum depression. Avi was just five weeks old.

It wasn't my first dance with depression ... and I've dealt with anxiety throughout my life. But when the crash came I felt completely alone and deeply ashamed. I had a handful of people telling me it wasn't my fault, that hormones, stress and sleep deprivation were to blame. They told me it was far more common than I realized ... and that those early months are so hard for every new parent.

Yet it took a really long time before those words would sink in.

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Now, Rosh Hashanah is the quintessential pivot point between who we are and who we want to be: between all that's been and all that will be. It's impossible to look ahead to the future without looking back to the past ... and that's one of the reasons many of us are here today.

But to *truly* participate in the meaningful work this season demands, we must be willing to get real. We can't just skim the surface of *teshuvah*, or focus on the stuff from last year that's easiest to recall.

To achieve that fresh start and clean conscience ... we must be willing to crawl out from underneath the dark and the ugly ... and step out into the light.

And so today, I want **us** to start talking. I want to spark an honest conversation. About why what happened to me matters – to *millions* of women **and** men – to families around the world.

Now, I confess, my recovery was shorter than most. I had the resources, the health insurance, and the access I needed to get better quickly. I also had an amazing team who immediately jumped in to help: Avi's grandparents, his uncles, our closest friends from childhood and college who flew to Seattle to be with us, and my extraordinary-beyond-words husband, who took an extended leave from work right at the start of busy season.

Together, they dragged my illness out into the light, refusing to see it as something that would simply pass with time. They knew I needed to get better so I could get back to caring for my son.

My shorter recovery – and the support of my ‘squad’ – enabled me to return to work *full-time* by Purim, as planned all along. And when I came back, my colleagues were exceptional, supportive and non-judgmental ... they eased me back into my role ... and I’m happy to report that not only did I remember how to do my job, but that the “well of empathy” within me grew even deeper over three months of leave.

Unfortunately, I am the exception, not the rule. According to Postpartum Support International, one in *seven* women experiences some form of mood disorder – anxiety, depression, panic, PTSD – during pregnancy and in the year following delivery. ***One in seven***. While many receive help, far too many American women go untreated, dismissed as having the “baby blues.”

Instead of telling new parents the truth – that those early days are really hard for many of us, we tell them, “*these should be the happiest days of your life,*” and we amplify their shame. We tell them they’re probably “overtired” or that their “bad, sad” feelings will pass, even though we expect them back at the office, on average, ***two-to-six weeks of unpaid leave*** later.

Yes, time marches on – but life only intensifies, and it’s unbelievable that something so universal – bringing a child into this world – can be so politically, economically and emotionally fraught.

The truth is, postpartum depression is just one small piece of a much greater puzzle that is our American approach to mental health – and altogether, this is a crucial *public health* issue that affects every one of us.

NAMI, The National Association on Mental Illness, shares that **43.8 million American adults** experience mental illness *each year*. **1 in 5 children** have or will have a mental illness between the ages of 13 and 18. And all this leads to depression being the **number one cause** of disability worldwide, costing the United States \$193.2 *billion* in lost earnings each year.

Mental illness touches *every corner* of our lives ... from disheveled-looking individuals we dismiss as “homeless” or “crazy,” who cause us enough discomfort to dodge to the other side of the street ... to war veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with severe post-traumatic-stress ... to our mutual acquaintance with the powerful mood swings who we think might be bipolar ... to the cyber-bullied teenager ... harboring hopelessness and contemplating suicide.

There are countless stories ... endless examples ... and for something so prevalent, so clearly tied not only to emotional but also *economic* success, one might think we’d devote more energy and resources to treatment programs, research, and eradicating

the stigma that surrounds mental health. One might think we'd see mental illness the way we see physical illness: when something hurts, or when something's broken, you go to the doctor. You take medicine. You work to fix it.

But we don't. Or we won't. We change the subject. We sidestep. We scoff at therapy. We dismiss. We refuse. We hide. *We insist that we are fine.*

But then our pain grows deeper ... and our problems – as individuals, as families, as a ***nation***, persist. So many of us – and for a while, myself included – choose not to step forward or share our struggles: that we're depressed, we have crippling anxiety, we've been on antidepressants for over a decade...

We choose denial and silence over honesty ... and empathy.

Many of us are afraid ... of the reactions of loved ones, acquaintances, coworkers, congregants ... afraid of the judgment ... and the consequences.

Far too many of us won't acknowledge our pain, or the pain of our loved ones ... who have suffered in silence far too long.

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Centuries ago, in the earliest pages of Genesis, our ancestors experienced the depths of human suffering. From Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden to the murder of Abel by his brother Cain to a flood that wiped out an entire planet ... our people have certainly known anguish.

On Rosh Hashanah we roll our sacred scroll to the Binding of Isaac; God's urging of Abraham to sacrifice the child he longed for. It's a powerful, controversial narrative – but there's much more to it than the interaction of father and son.

By turning our attention to another corner of the story, we witness the silent suffering of Sarah, Isaac's mother. She is "advanced in years," unable to conceive a child. But the great irony of Sarah's tale is her responsibility to the future of the Jewish people. Through her body, God will make Abraham into a great nation.

Eventually God experiences profound empathy, "opens Sarah's womb," and Isaac emerges – the son Abraham is told to sacrifice at Mount Moriah.

And that's just our Torah reading.

Our traditional Haftarah reading contains the story of Hannah, a woman who also suffers in silence, for she, too cannot conceive. Her words of prayer are powerful enough for God to listen ... and again tap into God's empathy: God opens *Hannah's* womb so she can conceive the prophet Samuel.

Two women anchor the sacred texts of Rosh Hashanah. Two women whose worth is bound up in their marriages and fertility, whose burdens turn to blessings in the form of beloved sons.

Yet ... both these stories contain and conclude with similar tropes. Sarah dies soon after Isaac's near-sacrifice; our *midrash* suggests that Sarah lost her mind, devastated by what Abraham nearly did to their son. And Hannah is portrayed as a crazy woman, a drunk – her words of prayer perceived as the mutterings of a person not in their right mind.

Now, not until this year did I recognize the risk our sages took in highlighting these stories ... on Rosh Hashanah, *hayom harat olam*, birthday of the world; the day on which a new chapter in the story of our people begins.

These stories – Sarah and Hannah's stories – aren't hidden away in the dark corners of our sacred tradition; they are read, they are heard, and they are *honored*.

I choose to see this as an act of courage ... and *empathy* ... by our ancestors ... who saw in these women's pain an opportunity. They knew there could be value, comfort, and HOPE in sharing their words and in sharing OUR pain with one another.

Because we *all* harbor stories of agony ... losses and setbacks and secrets that shape who we are and affect who we love ... be it mental illness or addiction, a difficult upbringing or challenges no person should ever have to face.

The authors of our *machzor* ... architects of *Avinu Malkeinu* and *Unetaneh Tokef* ... believed that no one – man, woman, or child – should ever have to suffer in silence ... that we thrive in *community* ... and that it is our obligation as Jews, and as *human beings* ... to speak up ... to listen ... and to *act*.

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This is not just any New Year. Our country and our world are poised on the brink ... our children and grandchildren are watching, waiting to see what happens next.

And it's not just the election; it's not all about that Tuesday in November. It's gun violence and a massive refugee crisis and the future of black lives in America ... it's ***paid family leave for all*** and our children's health and their education and how much longer our Earth can sustain global climate change and so much more.

There are things – so many things – that make many of us want to crawl under the covers and never re-emerge ... but then we'd be missing out on so much *life*.

The theologian Emanuel Levinas – a man whose theories were shaped by the Holocaust – taught that we experience God in the face of the Other ... that through

our authentic encounters with other human beings, our empathy grows ... and we experience the Divine.

Throughout the Torah, God calls out to humans and we respond, “*hineini*,” here I am.

This coming year we will be called upon in so many ways. We will be challenged. We – and the people we care about – will endure heartbreak, and perhaps tragedy, and we will struggle.

*But ... we need not struggle alone.*

We have the power to rise up and say, “*hineini – I am here!*” Whether it is we who are suffering or the Other who stands with their soul bared before us ... we already have built within us abundant capacity for empathy – our own “wells” without limit – so let us be unafraid to tap into them.

*We must talk about the difficult things no one talks about – we must do our part to end the stigma around mental health ... we must talk about it with friends and with our children, in our workplaces and social circles, when we are at home and on our way ... we must work to eradicate the shame and acknowledge to ourselves and those we love that treatment IS possible. That incredibly holy work ... begins with **talking. owning. sharing.***

We must do it ... we *must* ... for the people we love, for the ones we may never see face-to-face and especially ... for those new mothers and fathers adjusting to the demands of parenthood. They’re bringing the next generation into the world ... so let’s look out for them.

As you leave the sanctuary today, there will be handouts with information on recognizing and treating mental illness; additionally, in the coming days I will follow up with more resources that I hope you will hold onto ... for yourself, your loved ones, and those you have yet to meet.

For who knows when you might get the chance to save someone’s life?

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If my story offers you just one takeaway, let it be this: we are far more resilient than we even realize and we simply cannot do this thing called life ... alone.

As we begin this New Year together, as one community, let us heed those words ... open our hearts ... and let us thrive, together, as one. Shana Tova.

## **Further Resources:**

### **Postpartum Depression:**

[Postpartum Support International](#) is a great resource; it has information for the family unit on perinatal mood disorders and opportunities to seek immediate help.

[Perinatal Support Washington](#) is a local organization working to support new mothers and fathers. They have information on support groups, doulas, and connecting with other parents to ensure struggling moms and dads do not feel isolated.

I was fortunate to work with Swedish Medical Center's system. They have since opened the [Center for Perinatal Bonding and Support](#) on their First Hill campus - an incredible program and the first of its kind on the West Coast.

And, are you in a position of influence where you work? Advocate for stronger maternal and paternal paid leave policies as a long-term investment in employees. Several studies indicate that paid family leave benefits all types of organizations economically in the long run, instilling loyalty in employees and cutting down on the recruitment and training costs for new hires. Through paid leave parents have a paycheck to rely on - and time to heal - when things aren't going so smoothly in those early weeks and later on.

For more information on paid leave, including next steps in Washington State, check out this article from [ParentMap](#).

### **Mental Health:**

[NAMI](#) - the National Alliance on Mental Illness - is a tremendous organization. Support them, utilize their resources and check with them to ensure your insurance is doing all it can to cover the costs of mental healthcare. October 2-8 is Mental Illness Awareness Week, a great time to support their work. And go [here](#) for the handouts I had available after services.

Just last week President Obama shared powerful words on PTSD in the military, suicide and stigma at a Presidential Town Hall. Here is a [poignant video](#) featuring his words.

Disability often goes hand in hand with mental illness; as I mentioned in my sermon, depression is the number one cause of disability throughout the world. [Disability Rights Washington](#) is a private non-profit protecting the rights of people with disabilities; contact them to see how you can help and support their work.

If you or someone you know is experiencing a mental health crisis, information on King County's 24-hour Crisis Line can be found [here](#).

Finally, one of my family's favorite artists, Bruce Springsteen, recently released a memoir, *Born to Run*. In it he speaks for the first time of his lifelong battle with depression. Here is an article on [why that matters](#) - and I encourage you to [pick up a copy](#) to learn how mental illness affects one of the world's most beloved and prolific musical forces.

I look forward to continuing this conversation with you in the coming year. May we all be blessed in 5777 with happiness and good health - physical, mental and spiritual.

With love,  
Rabbi Jaclyn Cohen