

THE MENTAL HEALTH
AWARENESS SHABBAT

BROUGHT TO YOU BY



The Mental Health Service for our Community

WHY MARK THE MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS SHABBAT (MHAS)?

MHAS falls annually on Shabbat “Bo”, the weekly Torah portion which tells about the Plague of Darkness. The description of the plague of darkness has particular resonance with mental illness – the darkness was so intense that people couldn’t move from their position. This has parallels with descriptions of mental illness.

It is an opportunity to encourage people of all ages to be more in touch with their own mental health and wellbeing and to raise awareness of mental health and mental illness in the local and wider community.

Last year over 120 synagogues, student and youth groups across the full range of Jewish religious affiliation throughout the UK engaged in the MHAS.

“The subject of good mental health and mental health awareness and support is so important and impacts all of us. Thank you for setting up and running this initiative.”

– Rabbi Garber, Shenley United Synagogue



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KEY FACTS ON MENTAL HEALTH

WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

Mental health refers to our cognitive, behavioural, and emotional wellbeing - it is all about how we think, feel, and behave. It helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others and make choices.

Mental health also includes a person's ability to enjoy life - to attain a balance between life activities and efforts to achieve psychological resilience.

WHAT IS MENTAL ILLNESS?

A medically diagnosable illness which can result from a number of factors including biological or developmental. It can affect the way we feel, act and think and disrupts our ability to work or carry out other daily activities and engage in satisfying personal relationships. It can be managed through prevention, diagnosis, treatment and mental health recovery.

WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH RECOVERY?

Mental health recovery means being able to live a good life, as defined by the person, with or without symptoms. It is a unique and personal experience that can have its ups and downs. Mental health recovery focusses on what a person CAN do rather than on what they can't. It is not necessarily easy or straightforward. Many people describe the need to persevere and to find ways to maintain hope through the most trying times.

PARITY OF ESTEEM

The principle by which mental health must be given equal priority to physical health. It was enshrined in law in 2012. The government requires NHS England to work for parity of esteem to mental and physical health through the NHS Mandate. This has still not yet been realised.

KEY FACTS ON MENTAL ILLNESS:

- At any given time, 1 in 6 working-age adults have symptoms associated with mental ill health. (NHS Digital, 2017)
- Mental illness is the largest single source of burden of disease in the UK. Mental illnesses are more common, long-lasting and impactful than other health conditions. (Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer, 2013)
- The total cost of mental ill health in England is estimated at £105 billion per year. (NHS England, The Five Year Forward View, 2016)
- While there are more people at work with mental health conditions than ever before, 300,000 people with a long term mental health problem lose their jobs each year, and at a much higher rate than those with physical health conditions. (The Independent Review of Mental Health and Employers, 2017)
- Nearly half (43.4%) of adults think that they have had a diagnosable mental health condition at some point in their life (35.2% of men and 51.2% of women). A fifth of men (19.5%) and a third of women (33.7%) have had diagnoses confirmed by professionals. (NHS Digital, 2017)
- 1 in 8 children have a diagnosable mental health disorder – that's roughly 3 children in every classroom. (NHS, 2018)
- Nearly half of 17-19 year olds with a diagnosable mental health disorder has self-harmed or attempted suicide at some point, rising to 52.7% for young women. (NHS, 2018)
- In 2018, there were 6,507 suicides registered in the UK, an age-standardised rate of 11.2 deaths per 100,000 population; the latest rate is significantly higher than that in 2017 and represents the first increase since 2013. Three-quarters of registered deaths in 2018 were among men (4,903 deaths), which has been the case since the mid-1990s. (ONS, 2019)

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NHS 5 WAYS TO WELLBEING

Evidence suggests there are 5 steps 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.



CONNECT

Connect with the people around you: your family, friends, colleagues and neighbours. Spend time developing these relationships.



BE ACTIVE

You don't have to go to the gym. Take a walk, go cycling or play a game of football. Find an activity that you enjoy and make it a part of your life.



KEEP LEARNING

Learning new skills can give you a sense of achievement and a new confidence. So why not sign up for that cooking course, start learning to play a musical instrument, or figure out how to fix your bike?



GIVE TO OTHERS

Even the smallest act can count, whether it's a smile, a thank you or a kind word. Larger acts, such as volunteering at your local community centre, can improve your mental wellbeing and help you build new social networks.



BE MINDFUL

Be more aware of the present moment, including your thoughts and feelings, your body and the world around you. Some people call this awareness "mindfulness". It can positively change the way you feel about life and how you approach challenges.

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SERMON / UNITED

United Sermon by Rabbi Zvi Portnoy, Associate Rabbi of Hendon United Synagogue.

Two Jews were standing and talking on a Moscow street. One of them did not have official papers permitting him to be in Moscow at the time. When a police officer approached them to verify their documents, the Jew with the documents told his friend not to worry and then proceeded to run from the officer. The officer began to chase him. When he finally caught up, the officer asked him to show his documents, which he did. The officer asked him, "Why did you run away from me when you have the right documents?" "My doctor told me to run one mile each day," responded the Jew. "But why didn't you stop when you saw me running after you," asked the officer. "I thought your doctor told you the same," said the Jew.

The fifty-two chapters of the biblical book of Jeremiah from which today's Haftorah are taken are some of the most poignant and heart-wrenching in the entire Hebrew Bible, depicting the sunset of the Jewish people in their homeland and the destruction of the First Temple and Jerusalem in the hands of Babylonia in the year 586 BCE.

Jeremiah witnessed first-hand, the massacre of hundreds of thousands of Jews and the exiling of his nation, documented by the prophet in the book of Jeremiah and in his second book, Eicha, Lamentations, which we read on the 9th of Av. This was the first time in history when the Jewish people lost their independence and were expelled from their Land. At the time, it seemed this was the end. Gloom and despair yet, what is unique about Jeremiah is that, unlike many other prophets and leaders, we know much about his personal emotions and experiences. The two biblical books authored, Jeremiah and Lamentations, dedicate significant space to his own inner turmoil. What we discover is how deeply Jeremiah suffered. He experienced constant rejection by the people he loved and reached out to. He lived alone, he was poor, ridiculed, and mocked. Jeremiah was beaten, tortured, and escaped death at a hairbreadth. The king and priests even placed him in a cistern of quicksand, to die a slow, agonising death. As a result, the prophet wrestled with great loneliness, feelings of defeat, and profound despair. In his own words:

"O Lord, You enticed me, and I was enticed; You overpowered me and prevailed. I have become a laughing-stock; everyone mocks me... Cursed be the day I was born! May the day my mother bore me not be blessed! Cursed be the man who brought my father the news, made him very glad, saying, "A child is born to you—a son!"... Why was I not killed in the womb? My mother should have been my grave? I should have remained eternally pregnant inside of her! Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame?"

How did Jeremiah—one of the greatest prophets in Jewish history—manage to handle this sense of despair and isolation? How did he deal with the disappointment, abandonment, and agony? The opening chapter of the book of Jeremiah depicting the moving first encounter between the prophet Jeremiah and G-d, provides an awe inspiring answer.

"And the word of G-d was upon me (Jeremiah), saying: 'When I had not yet formed you in the belly, I already recognized you; and when you had not yet come forth from the womb, I sanctified you; a

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prophet to the nations I have made you.' "And I said, 'Aha! My Lord, G-d, behold! - I know not how to speak, for I am but a child. G-d said to me, 'Do not say 'I am but a child,' rather to wherever I send you shall you go, and whatever I command you shall you speak. Fear not before them, for I am with you... See I have appointed you this day over the nations and over the kingdoms, to uproot and to smash and to destroy and to raze; to build and to plant..."

The message is simple and profound. Yes, Jeremiah, you will face much inner and outer turmoil. But know this: Your infinite Divine power is always more potent than all the darkness inside of you, and all around you. I recognised you, I conceived you, I chose you, I loved you. I knew your strengths, your light, your courage, your wisdom, your holiness—before you were born, and before you were even formed. Your soul is a piece of mine. Before you faced any darkness, I knew how much infinite light you possess, as your light if part of Mine. The greatest and deepest fear and sense of despair that takes us over is because we allow the inner voices of gloom, depression and melancholy to overtake us to our core. They become our life. They redefine us, we forget the truth: I may be dealing with some scary thoughts inside of me; I may be confronting some nasty outer forces, but my Divine soul, my sacred core, precedes all else. At my core I am Divine. And it is embedded in my essence, and thus I can prevail over all else. This is what saves Jeremiah—and it can help us all too. Throughout all of his turmoil, he never doubts for a moment that G-d is with him, G-d has sent Him, and as dark as the situation is, He contains all the resources needed to bring light into the situation. He is not a victim; he was sent into this very space. Even in silence Jeremiah's greatest resource was the unwavering confidence that even in the silence G-d is present and working through him.

In May 1940, Adolf Hitler and his Nazi war machine were sweeping across the European continent. The future of the free world hung in the balance. In its darkest hour, as Great Britain was about to be attacked by Germany, the English chose Winston Churchill (1874-1965) as its Prime Minister. His weapons were his pen, his voice and his words. "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat," he told the House of Commons in his first speech as Prime Minister. Things quickly turned from bad to worse. France collapsed, Belgium surrendered, and a quarter of a million British soldiers barely managed to escape from Dunkirk.

Even as the war news moved from dangerous to desperate to disastrous, Churchill never wavered. In speech after speech, he infused the British with the spirit to fight on against Hitler's monstrous tyranny. He is the man who saved the free world—and we owe him an unparalleled debt of gratitude. Yet, throughout much of his life, Churchill was prone to periods of acute depression, which he called "the black dog." He told his daughter, "I have achieved a great deal to achieve nothing in the end." He told a friend that "he prays every day for death." He told his doctor, Lord Moran, that he kept himself from standing close to a train platform or overlooking the side of a ship because he might be tempted to take his own life.

Why are the greatest people often haunted by a sense of failure and deep melancholy? Noted examples are Churchill, Abraham Lincoln, Beethoven, and Tolstoy. Perhaps, it is their depth that makes them far more sensitive to all that is going on inside of them and around them. They feel deeply what other people overlook. Perhaps, all greatness is counterbalanced by the ability to descend into the abyss, as the Talmud puts it, "whoever is greater than his friend, his destructive inclination is also greater." Perhaps, the greater you are, the more you realise what can and must be achieved and you feel how inadequate your performance is. But it is not only the greats. Many of us

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struggle often with profound feelings of despair, depression, doubt, and despondency. Some of us know full well the unbearable agony of mental illness and clinical depression—something that few grasp, unless they experience it or are educated about it. But even so many of us who are generally healthy, must deal with moments of gloom and dejection.

G-d's message to Jeremiah is a message to every soul. "When I had not yet formed you in the belly, I already recognized you." Let not your truest identity shrink in insecurity in the face of adversity. Your Divine essence is the most innate part of your existence and it is infinitely powerful, beautiful, wholesome and sacred. Before you were even formed in the belly, "I recognised you." You are Mine. I have chosen you; you were conceived in my mind in love. You are a piece of G-d, a fragment of infinity, a Divine spark. G-d continues: "And when you had not yet come forth from the womb, I sanctified you."

G-d says to the Jeremiah in each of us: Your soul must remember how powerful it is. You are a child of G-d. Your playing small does not serve the world. We are all meant to shine. We were born to make manifest the glory of G-d that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others. Churchill's metaphor of the Black Dog is powerful. The dog may follow you, the dog may bark, the dog may crawl into bed with you. But the dog is not you. Your depression, your thoughts of despair, are not you. You are Divine. Never ever doubt that G-d has conceived you in love, put you here, and has given you all the resources to fulfil your amazing mission. You are His messenger, and as such, contain infinite power and strength. Even as you confront all types of obstacles, inside or outside, you were sent into that space, given all the tools needed to serve as G-d's prophet wherever you are and in whatever circumstances you find yourself. Be not afraid of greatness. And if, at times, you feel like running away, you should not feel bad about it. So did the greatest. To feel fear is fine. To give way to it, is not. For G-d has faith in us even if, at times, even the best lack faith in themselves.

