



The JAMI Mental Health Awareness Shabbat<sup>1</sup>, is a weekend to bring greater attention to mental health within the Jewish community. A way to bring awareness of mental health, mental health support, and continue to have the conversation of how we as a community enhance and help with mental health. This is not the end of the conversation, but hopefully a beginning.

The Honeycomb Project collected dvrei Torah and thoughts from rabbis and cantors of the Movement of Reform Judaism and Liberal Judaism.

With many thanks, please find dvrei Torah from:

Rabbi Rebecca Birk, The Finchley Progressive Synagogue  
Rabbi Naomi Goldman, Kol Chai Hatch End Reform Jewish Community  
Rabbi Aaron Goldstein, Northwood and Pinner Liberal Synagogue  
Rabbi Dr Michael Hilton, Senior Lecturer, Vocational Studies Leo Beck College  
Rabbi Eryn London, Honeycomb Project  
Rabbi Dr Reuven Silverman, Manchester Reform Synagogue  
Rabbi Debbie Young-Somers, Edgware & Hendon Reform Synagogue

Shabbat Shalom,  
The Honeycomb Project Team

The Honeycomb Project is a joint project with The Movement for Reform Judaism and Liberal Judaism, increasing volunteer training across the movements. For more information please follow our [Facebook Page](#) and [website](#) or feel free to email [honeycomb@liberaljudaism.org](mailto:honeycomb@liberaljudaism.org) or [honeycomb@rjuk.org](mailto:honeycomb@rjuk.org).

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://jamiuk.org/get-involved/mhas/>



## Rabbi Rebecca Birk, The Finchley Progressive Synagogue

Thoughts for Mental Health Shabbat 2022

The composer Tchaikovsky experienced himself as fragile and in 1876 wrote these words to a beloved nephew.

*Probably you were not quite well, my little dove, when you wrote to me, for a note of real melancholy pervaded your letter. I recognised in it a nature closely akin to my own. I know the feeling only too well. In my life, too, there are days, hours, weeks, aye, and months, in which everything looks black, when I am tormented by the thought that I am forsaken, that no one cares for me. Indeed, my life is of little worth to anyone.*

He could have been referring to the plague of darkness in this week's Parashat Bo. So keenly does he identify the blackness of depression and melancholy. Torah describes this darkness as palpable.

*[so] thick [that ] people could not see one another, and for three days no one could get up from where he was.*

One can feel the heaviness and de-pressing nature of this 'darkness' that the poet Jane Kenyon described so memorably, *pressing the bile of desolation into every pore.*

Darkness may have been just another of the ten plagues but it's possible meaning and resonance reaches out of Torah to us now. To our young people struggling through Covid, to each of us weighed down by the isolation of mental illness of all kinds; anxiety, depression, confusion and alienation from the life we are 'expected' to lead with ease.

Such dislocation resonates profoundly this year after the months we've endured and the continuing challenges that are still so real.

Our synagogue is focusing on **empathy** this Shabbat, on the power of empathetic concern and connection, of meeting people truly where they are. This is a skill we can all develop. We are also working with Barnet Citizens (CUK) clear requests for our Borough's Mental Health provisions to ensure both more and better empathy in all such services in Barnet. From better sign posting to someone there when you need it.

We all need and can give empathy; ready to be present for when, as our Exodus 10 describes; *no one can get up from where they were.*



## Rabbi Naomi Goldman, Kol Chai Hatch End Reform Jewish Community<sup>2</sup>

There have been months of difficulty and uncertainty. The world feels more chaotic than it has ever been. The Egyptians have already faced the threat of disease, and climate change with dramatic hailstorms. Now locusts cause a food shortage by eating everything in sight. It's impossible to plan; perhaps the recent outbreak of boils is still causing children to get sent home from school. It all feels hopeless. And so a thick darkness falls, a darkness that can be felt. And nobody saw anyone else or left their home for three days.

The timing of Mental Health Awareness Shabbat, on Shabbat Bo, is inspired by the account of the ninth plague of darkness, as a metaphor for depression, but rarely has the account of the Egyptians' plight felt more relevant than this year. We know that the pandemic and lockdowns of 2020-21 took a huge toll on mental health, particularly among young people.

We are still going through the emergence from lockdown, the adjustment to a new normal, and in many ways, this is just as hard a process, because we are all emerging at different speeds. Some of us are still shielding. For others life has gone back to normal. And all of us are, I think, a little traumatised by the experience of living with extreme uncertainty. We can make plans but we know that they might have to be jettisoned if there's a new outbreak. Everything feels provisional, unsettled.

For those of us who already have a tendency to anxiety, these are anxious and difficult times. All mental health services have seen a significant increase in demand, particularly from children and young people. A recent survey by NHS Digital showed that one in six children in England in 2021 had a probable mental disorder, facing loneliness, problems eating and sleeping and missing school. The plague of darkness was particularly bad because it wasn't isolated. It came after eight other plagues wore down people's resilience, creating a climate of fear and disruption that left the Egyptians feeling paralysed.

We can't always keep the darkness at bay even in good times. Sometimes we have to learn to live with depression or other kinds of mental illness, but we can always choose how to respond, how to manage our mental health and the mental health of those around us, how to be kind to each other.

These are, however, particularly hard times and we need to look out for each other more than ever. In Parshat Bo, we hear that the Israelites, by contrast with the Egyptians, had light in their homes. They weren't stuck in suffocating darkness. What might that light look like for us?

In the Talmud (bBava Batra 14b) Rav Yosef teaches that brokenness can be holy too. Moses put the broken fragments of the first tablets of law in the ark together with the new ones that he carved. We do something similar when we break the matzah on Seder night and put one piece aside for the Afikoman to be hunted after dinner. We can't continue the seder until we have brought together the broken pieces and then eaten them. The broken fragments imply that our dark moments, our broken selves, are no less central to our relationship with God than our best moments, that the most difficult parts of ourselves are as loved as the shiny parts.

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://jamiuk.org/get-involved/mhas/toolkit/sermons/>



I think that's the light that protected the Israelites. It's about accepting and acknowledging that we are all a little broken, that we can allow light through our cracks. The challenge of any relationship, whether it's with a person, with God, or with ourselves, is to acknowledge that every part of us is central to that relationship – including our depression, our anxiety, our challenges around mental health. That's the first step in moving away from the darkness and into the light. We are human, so we are not perfect - and we are complete in that imperfection.

The broken fragments are put in the ark, and the Zohar, the foundational text of Jewish mysticism, teaches that the Ark is a symbol for the human heart. And that a person's heart must be a little broken if it is going to serve as a home for the Shechinah, that part of God that lives inside us. Because, the Zohar says, the Shechinah only dwells within broken vessels.

We have all been through a very tough couple of years. For those of us who already have mental health issues it's been particularly difficult. But our task as Jews is to nurture the light within us by acknowledging that we are all vulnerable, we're all finding this hard and we all need each other. And that is how we'll get out of the darkness toward the light.



## Rabbi Aaron Goldstein, Northwood and Pinner Liberal Synagogue

*Va-yakheil 5780, Exodus 36:1-8 (20 March 2020)*

“Let, then, Bezalel and Oholiab and all the skilled persons whom the Eternal One has endowed with skill and ability to perform expertly all the tasks connected with the service of the sanctuary carry out all that the Eternal One has commanded.”

Moses then called Bezalel and Oholiab, and every skilled person whom the Eternal One had endowed with skill, everyone who excelled in ability, to undertake the task and carry it out. They took over from Moses all the gifts that the Israelites had brought, to carry out the tasks connected with the service of the sanctuary.

But when these continued to bring freewill offerings to him morning after morning, all the artisans who were engaged in the tasks of the sanctuary came, each from the task upon which he was engaged, and said to Moses, “The people are bringing more than is needed for the tasks entailed in the work that the Eternal One has commanded to be done.”

Moses thereupon had this proclamation made throughout the camp: “Let no man or woman make further effort toward gifts for the sanctuary!” So, the people stopped bringing [contributions]; their efforts had been more than enough for all the tasks to be done.

Then all the skilled among those engaged in the work made the Tabernacle...”

We are living in, for my generation and younger for sure, unprecedented times. We have never experienced quarantine or rationing. Perhaps that is why a general response has been panic, exemplified by horrible scenes of scuffles and elderly and vulnerable people struggling to buy simple products.

There is understandable concern and stress for so many regarding their physical health, especially among those who euphemistically have ‘underlying health conditions;’ not to mention those who will inevitably be directly affected by Coronavirus / Covid-19.

The mental and psychological stress and anxiety is perhaps even more acute and widespread. New phrases have entered our language such as ‘self-isolation,’ and only the most cavalier could say they had not had a moment of concern. There are many of us who are in any case anxious; those who will not be taking GCSEs or A Levels or potentially final exams at university or professional qualifications; and those whose livelihoods are on the line.

Perhaps understandably concerned and yet best-equipped are those of our most mature members: and we have many. Whilst not necessarily able to be out and about as they may wish it is their spirit that can be inspiring to us all, and the ability to accept support – a skill as high as that of one of Bezalel’s artisans.

We all have skills to contribute to this situation, and can bring them generously to others, until our leaders can call out ‘maspik,’ ‘dayeinu,’ ‘enough,’ a new season has arisen and we can walk out into it with our heads held high, in the knowledge that we have all made our contribution to the community: our community of Northwood and Pinner Liberal Synagogue and of all your communities, relevant to the many joining us from around the UK and world this Kabbalat Shabbat.



And of course, when we have enough then to think beyond us. In our local community we have appeals from New Hope and the Watford and Three Rivers Refugee Partnership for support and you will have forged your own partnerships with social action/justice organisations. We can all give at this time. Whether it is currently under-utilised skills, our efforts, our time and our money.

Towards the conclusion of this sidrah, indeed the book of Exodus, we read: “When Moses had finished the work, the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the Presence of the Eternal one filled the Tabernacle.”

There will still be times to come, the human contact and community we are allowed is insufficient to fill us and our homes, each one a small Tabernacle. May we then look up: Seek a Presence we have not known or felt before. May we find that Presence and be open to being filled by the Presence of the Eternal: skill, ability, wisdom and a little bit of nous, to know what is right to do at this time when we are all somewhat fumbling.

Let us in times of need, ‘look up to the hills.’ “Esa einei el he’harim: I lift my eyes to the hills, where will my help come from. My help will come from God, Maker of heaven and earth...Psalm 121.”

May the Ever-present God, guard our coming in and going out, now and always.



## Rabbi Dr Michael Hilton, Senior Lecturer, Vocational Studies Leo Beck College

### FOR MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS SHABBAT 2021

This is taken from Michael Hilton, “How We Treat the Homeless and the Sick” in *What Makes Me Angry: Howls of Rabbinic Rage...And Solutions*, Edited by Jonathan Romain, Reform Judaism, London 2021, pages 88 – 90.

In January 2014, my younger sister Rosemary took her own life by jumping from her third floor bedroom window. Her attempts to get help, and my attempts to get her help, had led nowhere. Buoyed up by anger, I spent weeks writing a 20 page letter to the NHS Trust responsible for her care, detailing line by line, day by day, all the mistakes they had made, culminating in a complete failure to understand that she was seriously ill. Eventually the inquest into her death concluded that “the risk to her life had not been properly assessed” and I received an apology from CNWL Foundation NHS Trust.<sup>3</sup>

These days, I am part of the Mental Health Action Team at Harrow Citizens. Most of us on the team know about the failures in local services from personal experiences or through being carers of patients. But as a team we’ve come to realise just how hard it is to improve the lot of acutely mentally ill people. A recent local report<sup>4</sup> highlighted the lack of timely support to crisis care, long waiting times for talking therapies, and the lack of offers to support carers. There are still horror stories, such one I heard about a patient discharged from hospital and found very shortly afterwards sleeping in a tube station. The co-ordination is poor and the service is not patient focused. Staff are encouraged to manage their own tasks without a holistic approach which takes responsibility for all of a patient’s needs. Report after report gets written, and the service is constantly undergoing “redesign” or “transformation” but never improves. But more often than in the past, those affected by poor services find a collective voice, and that can be very powerful. A day centre for mental health patients known as “The Bridge” was under threat of closure in 2016, and again in 2021. Fortunately there are some very articulate users of that service, and local councillors who have them and their families as local voters, are likely to back down and keep the service open. This is happening in homeless campaigns as well, where the most powerful voices so often come from those who have been homeless themselves, most notably from the survivors of the Grenfell Tower tragedy. Their anger and their raised voices are so much more important and effective than mine.

Many years ago, when I trained as a teacher, the one book that really inspired me was not one of the textbooks on classroom management or child development, but the personal memoir of a teacher called Herbert Kohl, describing his struggle as a white man to control and then to befriend a class of 36 black ten to fourteen year olds in Harlem in the early 1960s, long before black lives were seen to matter. He remained friendly with some of them for years afterwards, and was moved by their struggles against discrimination. Of one former student he wrote: “She is not bitter or desperate, but she is very angry. The balance she

---

<sup>3</sup> You can read a full account of the inquest, and the apology at [www.rabbim.co.uk/inq](http://www.rabbim.co.uk/inq)

<sup>4</sup> Harrow User Group (2020) “Harrow Mental Health Needs Support 2020,” (Mind in Harrow), [www.mindinharrow.org.uk](http://www.mindinharrow.org.uk).



maintains between social anger and personal joy I have seen nowhere else.”<sup>5</sup> It’s hard to use anger in a constructive way, but this seems to me the key, to make sure that it never overwhelms us or destroys our underlying equilibrium. Anger is no good if it leads to an angry response: it has to be modified into calm and reasoned argument. The words of Proverbs are instructive here:<sup>6</sup> *A gentle answer turns away anger, but a hurtful word stirs up temper.* Herbert Kohl is now in his eighties but still trying to create excellent education for “the children of the poor. The problems persist, and he still believes that by hard, imaginative effort, they can be solved.”<sup>7</sup>

..

On this Mental Health Awareness Shabbat, let us think of those whose lives have been cut short by severe mental illness, and of those who grieve for them. Let us think of those who continue to suffer, and those who care for them. Let us work together to lift this plague of darkness and replace it with the light of a new awareness.

---

<sup>5</sup> Herbert Kohl (1975), *36 Children*, (Penguin Education Special reprint), p. 232.

<sup>6</sup> Proverbs 15:1. The translation is my own.

<sup>7</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert\\_R.\\_Kohl](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_R._Kohl) (accessed 28th May, 2021)



## Rabbi Eryn London, Honeycomb Project

This Shabbat, we read Parshat Bo, the parsha that describes the last three plagues in Egypt, locusts, darkness and the death of the first born. It is a Parsha that finishes the story of destruction and confusion, while leading up to the time of Exodus of the Children of Israel. Each plague increasingly encroaching on the lives of all those who were living in Egypt. I can imagine the fear, the sadness, the feeling of overwhelmedness that was flooding the streets of Egypt.

Perhaps the most striking of the plagues is that of the death of the first born. A plague that led to death in every household, where there was not going to be a single person in the land that was not grieving.

A bit ago, I saw a picture of a colouring page for Parshat Bo. It was a picture of Egyptians holding their dead firstborn children. Quite honestly, I don't think that this is an all too appropriate colouring page for young children, nor do I think that it is an idea that should be taken lightly, as we are taught and reminded again on Pesach, we are not to rejoice in the pain of others, even our enemies.

This picture has been on my mind. I can see in connection to that colouring page, real-life people holding their loved ones. Real-life people sitting next to the bed of their loved ones. Real-life people crying, looking shocked, looking lost, looking angry. I can feel through the pictures the devastation, the sadness, the grief. Feelings that many of us know all too well and have been amplified these past two years.

I feel like this image is a fitting one for mental health Shabbat. All too often we don't talk about grief, don't want to talk about grief, are unsure of how to talk about grief, might not even know that we are grieving.

This colouring page is a page that starts the conversation about grief, starting from very far away - a picture that is not even filled in yet. This colouring page can allow us to talk about the grief, the anger, the sadness, the loss. In this empty picture, there is room to think about what they were feeling, think about what we are feeling, imagine the conversation that they are having, or think about the very conversations we are having.

And what can we do for those who are grieving next to us? As it says in "Toward a Meaningful Life: The Wisdom of the Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson" by Simon Jacobson pg. 200 "A woman who suffered a great tragedy came to see her Rabbi. The Rabbi said to her: I have no answers for you, but I can cry with you."

May this Shabbat be one where we are able to talk about how we are feeling, what we are experiencing, how we are coping, and may we all be blessed to have someone there (physically or virtually) sit and 'just' be with us.



## Rabbi Dr Reuven Silverman, Manchester Reform Synagogue

A plague of darkness – to take a metaphor from our Sidrah Bo – has spread through communities around the world like a pandemic within a pandemic. Extra efforts of empathy are needed to penetrate the despair from being locked down physically and mentally.

Loss of loved ones and friends bringing loneliness, loss of jobs with loss of livelihood, identity, and direction– in so many cases these have been sudden bereavements with no chance to say goodbye or anticipate closure and nowhere to turn.

Victims of domestic violence and abuse are locked in, trapped with their tormentors. Long periods off work or off school or college have turned so many in on themselves and deeper into substance abuse or other addictions. Strained relationships, estrangements, were all there before, but are now made worse in ways unknown before bringing self-harm and suicidal thoughts.

Anxiety over the raising of restrictions, agoraphobia, social anxiety – dreading going out and being with people – are made worse by well-meaning friends and family members judging, knowing what’s best for you, rather than empathising.

Depression is a complete shutdown of feeling. Unless you have been through it you cannot comprehend it fully and your empathy is challenged. Research has also shown that when you are going through it yourself, because feelings are blocked, so is your empathy.

The metaphor of the Plague of Darkness in our Sidrah is frequently applied to Depression. The Torah text is very succinct and there is some obscurity in the language which fits the theme of this unknown, mysterious pitch-black shutdown of light and life: *‘vayamesh choshech* (hard even to pronounce it) ‘a darkness that could be felt’ is the common inadequate translation.

The Ninth Plague, the penultimate in the Exodus story, cries out for understanding, as does depression too. Whose plague was it? The Egyptians’ plague surely? “Israel had light in all their dwelling places”.

Midrashim, Mechilta, quoted by Rashi, and also Tanchuma suggest something different. This was the one plague Israel suffered too. Mechilta gives a reason for this plague upon the Egyptians. Many Israelites did not want to leave Egypt and they were punished for this by death. The darkness was so that Egyptians would not see the mass burials of Israelites and say: Aha – they are being afflicted like us! Where does Mechilta get this from? There’s maybe a clue in the last line: ‘the Israelites had light in their dwelling places’. Outside there were the funerals, dividing off the enlightenment of the faithful from the deaths of the deserters.

On both sides there were rifts: Egyptians could not see each other nor their neighbours. Israelites are presented by the Torah as miraculously immune. Midrash overturns it: their plague was in one way worse: no Egyptian died, many Israelites did. The Egyptians were not allowed to see the Israelite plague. They surely would not have had empathy, only Schadenfreude – ‘oh good, they are suffering like us!’

But according to this account, is there any empathy in Israel for their own, let alone for the Egyptians?



Working against empathy over bereavement, loss, depression, anxiety, are rescuing rationalizations like: 'you'll pull through', 'you've got inner strength', 'have faith!' Or- 'This is for a purpose', or – 'it's a test'. Or – 'you've no need to blame yourself – look how many others are going through the same thing or worse' – 'look at the glass as half full, and so on....' As if the answer to these issues were as simple as looking for a light switch and needing a word of advice where to find it and turn it on, instead of torment which needs working through and talking through and sometimes medication over long periods.

The 'talking cure' as it is hyperbolically called, at its best is more than talking. It is being present with the other person alongside their angst. It's asking to be allowed in, seeking to share understanding and experiencing how difficult expressing that understanding may be on the edge of awareness. If nothing else, the mere fact of being listened to may be in itself therapeutic. Hearing what you have to say to another person instead of your continuously repeating internal monologue, and hearing your own responses to the prompts that never entered your mind before, may be like learning something from yourself for the first time.

So my reading of the penultimate plague along with midrash is about the absence of empathy which is double-sided: the darkness in the other person which we are unable to witness, and the darkness within ourselves which prevents us seeing, sometimes because we are distracted by being apparently surrounded by light. Paradoxically the way through it is in seeking enlightenment by entering into the darkness.



## Rabbi Debbie Young-Somers, Edgware & Hendon Reform Synagogue

At Leo Baeck College, our rabbinical school, we were encouraged to get therapy. When I was beginning mine, an older relative asked ‘what on earth do you need therapy for? You aren’t broken!’ Two years later, that same relative had found themselves a counsellor and were working through a lifetime of grief and trauma. We all have things to deal with in life, and it’s so important that we are beginning to understand that it’s not a sign of weakness to look after our mental health, and to acknowledge there might be a problem. This turn around has, I think, been mirrored across not only the Jewish community, but society more broadly over the last few years, with celebrities and royalty helping to lift the taboo over talking about our mental health.

Although there is still a way to go, thank goodness the shift arrived before 2020. As we know, in lockdown, many people missed medical appointments or were too worried to go to their doctors and hospitals to get worrying bodily changes looked at. This will have devastatingly cost lives. Similarly, the mental health of the nation has been deeply impacted, and may have gone unchecked. It is important that we acknowledge the danger in ignoring the challenges of mental health, just as it is for our physical health.

This week’s Torah portion explores the last of the 10 plagues. I’ve always been struck by the pain the Egyptian people must have experienced collectively in their suffering, especially through the devastating final plague. But the word plague has resonances for us today they did not last time we gathered for JAMI’s mental health Shabbat. Having lived through almost a year of the modern plague of Covid19, we too are suffering, not only from the plague, but a host of anguishes caused by it, one of which is the increasing fragility of our mental health.

The plague of darkness suffered by the Egyptians could in fact be a metaphor not for dark skies, but emotional gloom. At some point, it has been the experience of almost everyone I know over the last year. Whether parents trying to cope with children who don’t want to learn with them and juggle full time jobs, or individuals experiencing wrenching loneliness and isolation, folk who have lost their jobs and security, and so many who lost loved ones they were unable to support in death, or grieve fully for due to social distancing. Our children have certainly not escaped this. Being torn away from their educations, their friends, their safety nets and structures, as well as witnessing fear and confusion in the adults in their lives, will, I suspect, leave trauma we will be dealing with for years to come.

As communities we have all done what we can to support one another physically, to protect one another from the plague of Covid 19, and to find new ways of connecting to one another through this strange and difficult time. But we mustn’t forget this other plague. Just as we tackle physical health, we must be willing to acknowledge our darkness, to reach out to one another, and to find where help and support lies. For some this is a piece of work that takes a lifetime, for others it may be more shortlived. For all of us it is something we must not be ashamed of, or turn away from.

In the face of physical plagues like Covid 19, the Torah knew what to advise; isolate those with illness, welcome them back when it is safe to do so, make sure they wash. While it might seem there are fewer answers when dealing with plagues of mental health, it isn’t necessarily so. In Exodus 10:23 we hear that one of the biggest problems with the plague of darkness was that people could not see one another, and in the Friedman translation ‘each man did



not get up from under it – three days’. The plague of darkness meant that people couldn’t meet one another (something we know more about from this year) but also couldn’t see each other; couldn’t see each other’s suffering and struggle, and thus they were crushed under the experience of this penultimate affliction.

In the face of this darkness so many of us have had a glimpse of this year, let’s try to find ways that each of us can help to bring light to the darkness, so that we can truly see another person before us, can help them, or perhaps ourselves, up from under the oppressive weight of the darkness.

There are no simple fixes to any health challenge. But I pray in the months to come we are able to support one another through any darkness, short or long, just as we have cared for our communities physical health through the pandemic.

