

From Darkness to Light: Men and Depression
Rabbi Adam J. Raskin
Parashat Vayakhel-Pekudei 5767; Men's Club Shabbat
Congregation Beth Torah

Downtown Jerusalem on a Saturday night is a happening place to be! The streets are flooded with Israelis, tourists, soldiers, and teenagers sipping coffee, perusing shops, and taking in the scene. At the bottom of Ben Yehudah street, our group gathered around a rather unlikely event. A handful of *hassidim* had rigged up a speaker system on the back of a truck, and were blaring religiously oriented music as they danced and hopped around the plaza and even on the roof of their truck. These Hasidim are easy to identify; rather than big fur streimels or stocking knickers, they wear the white, ski-cap like yarmulke of the Breslov sect. Around the edge of the yarmulke is written a mantra that is also on bumper stickers and spray-painted around Israel: It says: Na-nach-nachmanachman-me'uman. A chant that stretches out the name of their founder, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, who was born in Ukraine in 1772. Reb Nachman was a famously charismatic leader with a huge following of disciples. He was a pioneer thinker, teacher, and spiritual master. In one of his more famous teachings, which has also been turned into a chant, he said: *Mitzvah gedolah li'hiyot be'simcha tamid*: It is a great mitzvah, a commandment, to be happy all the time. Being constantly happy is difficult even for the most joyful among us, but this teaching is even more interesting when we consider that it was made by a man who suffered serious and recurrent bouts of depression. Reb Nachman's severe and crippling emotional swings are well documented, and he was known to lock himself up, isolating himself and refusing to see anyone from his students for long periods of time. One has to wonder whether he taught this notion of constant happiness as an attempt to talk himself out of his own debilitating depression.

Depression is not a new phenomenon at all: we have many examples in our own tradition: The famously manic depressive King Saul, the prophets Jeremiah, Elijah, Jonah, and of course Job. Moses surely had his moments of utter despair and despondency, and King David, in many of the Psalms attributed to him, writes poignantly

of “crying out from the depths.” But only recently is male depression a subject that is being spoken about openly and honestly. Depression has for a long time been stereotypically linked to women, and the hormonal changes involved in puberty, menstruation, childbirth and menopause. But today we are learning that men suffer in the same numbers with depression as women. In fact, according to a recent Newsweek report (2/26/2007), 6 million American men will be diagnosed with depression this year. And what’s more, a 1997 study indicated that depression rates in Jewish men are twice those of non-Jewish men. Many theories have been advanced to explain this. One is that Jewish men abuse alcohol at lower rates than non-Jews, and since alcohol use often masks depression, this might account for the skewed numbers. Others say that since there is a cultural expectation in the Jewish community of high achievement, education, and success, these pressures lead to higher rates of Jewish male depression. Still others comment that the Jewish experience with persecution, and our regular reflection on past national suffering all takes its toll. Whatever the rationale, I think it’s time we start talking about this in the open, and dealing with it head-on.

But we “strong silent types” are not always willing to admit to the problem. To admit to depression for some is to admit to a fundamental weakness, somehow a threat to our masculinity. Clark University chair of psychology Michael Addis writes, “Our definition of a successful man in this culture does not include being depressed, down, or sad.” But let’s consider the consequences of masking feelings of depression. Alcoholism, drug abuse, gambling, work-a-holism, angry outbursts, and even suicide--All of these are common destructive attempts to cover up depression, but more often wind up destroying marriages, damaging children, populating jail cells and emergency rooms, and wrecking careers. The less we talk about this issue, the more serious risk, even fatal risk men and the people who love them are exposed to. Newsweek reported that even the children of depressed fathers are affected by their parent’s behavior. “Rates of anxiety disorders and depression were three times as high among the adult children of depressed parents as they were among people whose parents were not depressed.”

For men who constantly say, “I don’t want to talk about it,” or “I don’t need any help,” or “I don’t have a problem,” perhaps they need to realize how their own depression penetrates the lives of their wives and their children...the very people they purport to love.

Reb Nachman, who I described to you earlier, taught that once a day every day, a person should engage in a process of what he called *hitbodedut*. *Hitbodedut* literally means to retreat, but what Reb Nachman meant was to go preferably outside and to verbalize, in one’s native tongue, all of his thoughts and feelings to God. *Hitbodedut* meant being able to speak freely to God both about joys and sorrows. And that it was not enough to do this in the meditative, quiet moments of prayer—but it must be spoken, even shouted out in order to truly release these feelings. I must admit to you that when I first studied *hitbodedut*, I tried it. Early one the morning, in the neighborhood near the Seminary, I took a long walk, and I spoke in a full voice the emotions and thoughts in my head. Since it was a New York City street no one even looked at me funny, and I will tell you that it was powerfully cleansing and meaningful. Whether this particular strategy appeals to you or not, the instruction to verbalize the complexities in our hearts is powerful advice. Again, this does not come easy to men. But let me tell you, my friends, the path to healing begins by telling your story. The Passover seder is a model for this journey. An oppressed, tormented, aggrieved people acknowledges its suffering by beginning the story in the dark years of despair. The haggadah tells us, *matchil b’gnut u’mesayem b’shevach*, we begin with the story of our despair, and conclude with praise for our salvation. The whole seder is a movement from bitterness to sweetness, sadness to joy, darkness to light, hopelessness to great hope, slavery to freedom. Friends, this is the same path we must begin to walk if we hope to move from the despair of depression to the light of life and satisfaction. It must begin with a verbal acknowledgement, a story, an accounting of your life and your feelings. Get for thyself a therapist, a counselor, a rabbi, a friend who can begin this journey with you.

Consider the words of my colleague and teacher, Rabbi Ed Feinstein. He writes:

“We Americans are insane. Eleven p.m. every night, we snuggle up, ready for bed, and what’s the last thing we do? We switch on the evening news. Thirty minutes of murder, brutality, corruption, catastrophe, moral lunacy, sports and weather. Good night. And then in the morning we are awakened by a clock radio set to some news station. And we begin the day with...murder, brutality, corruption, catastrophe, moral lunacy, sports and weather. And you want to know why you’re depressed?”

How much do we consider the effect of our daily routine on our soul and our psyche?! What if, instead of book-ending our day with the horrors of the world, we instead went to sleep and awakened with words of gratitude and thanksgiving in our hearts. What if we began the day with the simple phrase “*Modeh ani lifanecha, Melech Chai ve’kayam*” I give thanks to you God, King of the Universe, Who has restored my soul to me. What if we ended the day with the Sh’ma, a simple but profound statement of our faith in a power greater than ourselves. I believe the Jewish tradition is replete with tools for conquering despair. Take a moment to consider what we’re doing today. The fact that the most important Jewish moments are community moments that draw us out of our private lives and place us in social, interactive situations is profoundly meaningful. The synagogue itself is a catalyst for relationships, friendships, faith, and community. I do believe that being active in Jewish life provides a powerful antidote to despair. The gift of Shabbat, which is the greatest single stress reliever, demanding that we take a break from our work in order to refresh and rejuvenate our souls and relationships is a potent anti-depressant.

The truth is that there are many approaches to treating depression in men today. From medicines to therapies, thank God our society is learning more and acknowledging more about men’s depression. By the year 2020, the World Health Organization predicts that depression will rank second only to heart disease as a disabler of persons. And so I suggest to you that maybe what it means to be a real man is not only being physically fit, but also being emotionally fit. Being a real man means being able to acknowledge mental suffering and being courageous enough to take the steps to heal. Being a real man is not about denial or refusal to get help, but being wise enough to realize that you owe it to your spouse, your children, your friends, and yourself to get the help you need. I am here

for you as your rabbi, and I will do anything possible to connect you or someone you love the help they need. But you, as a real man, must take the first step.