

# The Scourge of Mental Illness

Rabbi Rick Shapiro  
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This past week we rode a roller coaster of emotions in our Beth Torah community. On Saturday evening we had the joy of honoring and paying tribute to Rabbi Reice and Aaron Nienshultz for their service to Beth Torah, but then had to say goodbye to Aaron and his family who left on Monday morning for Philadelphia. On Sunday we celebrated the festival of Shavuot and rejoiced with nine young members of our community as they celebrated their confirmation. Then, on Monday morning, I had to officiate at the funeral of a 20 year old member of our congregation – Jason Arkin – who had taken his own life after suffering for eight long years with mental illness.

The month of May is Mental Health Awareness Month, and so the original remarks I had planned to share with you this evening were written several weeks ago, long before Jason Arkin was even a blip on my radar. But I cannot help but believe that his death will serve as a tragic and all-too-painful exclamation point to what I have to say this evening.

I remember exactly when it happened. It was a bright sunny day in early July, and I was sitting having lunch with Lynn at the Elephant Bar in Santa Barbara, California. For several weeks I had been experiencing occasional bouts of melancholy and inexplicable crying. I wasn't sure what was going on with me, but I more or less ignored it and continued to go to work and try to function normally. That day, in the middle of our lunch, I began sobbing uncontrollably, and I knew something was wrong.

I got up from the table and called my primary care physician, who told me to do two things: first, to go over to the local pharmacy and pick up a prescription for zoloft that he was calling in immediately; and secondly, to go the next morning to a psychiatrist that he would call to get me an immediate appointment. I thank god every day for Dr. Jeff Kupperman, my doctor, and Dr. Michael Stuhlberg, my psychiatrist – they saved my life.

The next two years were the darkest and most painful times of my life. For a few months I continued to try to work, although in hindsight, I know that I was not really present. Then, right after the High Holy Days, things took a turn for the worse and I informed the Temple President that I had to take a medical leave. Then, after two months on leave, I tried to return to work, only to fail in my efforts, and return home. I submitted my resignation three weeks later, and did not work again for 18 months.

At Jason's funeral on Monday, Rabbi Levin reminded us that someone who has not suffered from depression cannot know the pain and agony that those afflicted with this disease live with every day. I had thought that I understood. I had worked with and counseled congregants over the years who were being treated for depression, and I honestly believed that I empathized with their suffering. But in the depths of my own illness, I can admit now that I suffered agonies far worse than I had ever imagined possible.

I am one of the fortunate ones – I was treated and have been able to return to life and return to my calling of helping others in need. Jason was not so fortunate. His illness was far more severe, and it ultimately claimed his life. And to their credit, Jason's parents Steve & Karen Arkin; his sister Jennifer, best friend Noah Blank, and dear friend Molly Chesis were courageous enough to speak of his illness as just that – an illness. They were able to bring Jason's affliction to the light of day, to shine a spotlight on a condition that is far too often hidden in the shadows with a sense of shame and embarrassment; far too often criticized and misunderstood; far too often stigmatized and hushed up in a conspiracy of silence.

Here in Kansas City, there is progress beginning to be made by Jewish Family Services in their sponsorship of the Greater Kansas City Mental Health Coalition. Their work is beginning to make a difference in encouraging those with mental illness to speak out and for those around them to listen without stigmatizing or minimizing the illness. Their message is simple: "Mental illness is real. It's common. It's treatable. And it's ok to talk about it." If you would like to learn more and get involved in this exceedingly important campaign, just go to [www.itsok.us](http://www.itsok.us).

Depression – indeed, all mental illness – is precisely that – an illness: no more and no less. There is no cure – only treatment. For some, despite being treated, they will suffer with it constantly their entire lives. For others, again despite being treated, they will return to a normal life for a time, only to have their illness occur again and again, randomly pitching them back into the bottomless black pit of despair and disrupting their lives. And still others are unable to see a way out, to see a future without pain, and their illness takes their lives.

Depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, severe anxiety disorder, psychosis, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and so many more – they are all illnesses, and are no more to be hidden and stigmatized than are cancer or heart disease or the flu. There has been a conspiracy of silence and stigmatism in our society, a conspiracy that, behind closed doors, when no one is listening, uses words like, “crazy, nuts, off his rocker.” It is a conspiracy of fear and misunderstanding, a conspiracy that expresses itself in words like, “Just pick yourself up and get back to your life . . . come on, you can do it;” or “She’s not really sick – she’s just having a bad day;” or “I guess we’d better stay away from him for a while – there’s no telling what he might do.”

Every life claimed by mental illness is a tragedy. But even more than that, every life claimed by mental illness is an **unnecessary tragedy**, all too frequently caused by silence, or ignorance or misunderstanding. We can, and we must, end the conspiracies of silence and fear and misunderstanding. If you have a loved one who suffers from mental illness, talk to them and reassure them that you love them completely and unconditionally. If you have a friend who suffers from mental illness, talk to them and reassure them that you are there for them, whatever they may need. If you know someone who you suspect is suffering from mental illness, don’t be afraid to talk about it and urge them to seek out treatment. And if you suspect that you, yourself, may be depressed or otherwise having mental or emotional difficulties, share your concerns with someone, talk about them without shame or fear, and seek out resources to get some help.

We can and we must learn to treat those afflicted with these diseases with compassion and understanding. Just because there is no blood or wound doesn’t mean they are not suffering.

Many of you know that I live with lymphoma. But this illness was recognized, I was treated, and I survived. Many of you know that I also suffer from coronary artery disease. But this illness, too, was recognized, it is treated regularly, and I continue to live a relatively normal life. And I suffer from clinical depression - but here, too, I received treatment and loving care, and I am one of the fortunate ones – I continue to survive, living testimony to the value of breaking the conspiracy of silence and denial.

But my survival was no accident. I had doctors who understood, and listened and understood my pain, and helped. I had friends who stood by me and refused to succumb to the stereotypes we associate with depression. But most importantly, I had a wife who was willing to go to hell and back with me to insure that I would be able to resume my life once again. Truly, without her love and unwavering faith in me, I would not be standing here this evening. And so to the loved ones of those who suffer these debilitating diseases I can only say: the road will not be easy, but if you can stay the course and show your spouse or child or sibling how much you continue to love them, it can make an enormous difference in the outcome.

But let me be clear – even here, there are no guarantees. Sometimes the pain is so great, the suffering so immense, the blackness of the pit so oppressive and so overwhelming that those afflicted see no way out of the pain other than ending their lives. But I can guarantee you that without these things – without love and compassion and understanding and a willingness to confront the disease – the results will be fatal for far more people. So please . . . tonight I beg you . . . help end the conspiracy of silence, denial, and stigmatization. Don’t let another day of silence go by. Speak out; acknowledge the pain you may not be able to see; help someone to face their illness and get help; offer comfort to someone you know. Do something to help end the scourge of mental illness that afflicts our nation, and I promise you – whether you are aware of it or not – you will save a life. And as we are reminded by our tradition: “One who saves a single life . . . it as if they have saved an entire world.”

*(Mishna Sanhedrin 4:9 – some editions, 4:5)*

בן יהי רצון – May this be God’s will. Amen.