‘‘Eikev: Consideration for the disabled and the mentally ill’’

By Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

In this section of Moses’ lengthy farewell speech that constitutes the book of Devarim he recalls the time God told him to ascend Sinai a second time to receive a replacement set of tablets for the ones he smashed in anger when he saw the Israelites worshipping the Golden Calf (Deuteronomy 10:1-6).

But we may well inquire as to what happened to the fragments of the first set of tablets that were scattered around the foot of Mount Sinai (see Exodus 32: 19)? Surely, once his anger had abated, Moses would never have treated them irreverently by leaving them behind on the ground! After all, inscribed on those stone fragments were letters of the Ten Commandments hewn out miraculously by the very hand of God!

The answer of the Rabbis was *Luchot v’shivrei luchot munachin ba’aron*, ‘Both the replacement tablets and the broken fragments from the first tablets were placed inside the Ark’ (Tal. Ber. 8a). Thus, not only did Moses not abandon them on the ground, but he actually housed them in the identical place of honour occupied by the replacement tablets. This also explains why, if a Sefer Torah is unusable, either because an error is found, letters have faded, or the parchment has become torn, until it is repaired or consigned to a genizah storage , it is housed inside the Aron Kodesh together with the other Sifrei Torah.

But the sages, ever on the look-out for further profound moral lessons to be inferred from every biblical occurrence, derived a most important teaching from the fact that ‘the broken fragments’ were also treated so reverently: ‘From here we learn,’ they said, ‘that we must show the greatest respect for a ‘broken’ scholar who may have forgotten his learning through age, adversity or illness.’

These latter categories speak directly to our modern age which, for all its shortcomings, can boast a heightened sense of concern for the sick and disabled. Much has been done over the past fifty or so years towards lightening their burden and introducing legislation to make life, and especially mobility, easier for the physically handicapped. When I was a

child, physical disability was accepted, since, in the aftermath of two world wars, there were many servicemen who returned minus limbs. Mental illness, on the other hand, had a stigma attached to it, and people with emotional stress were frequently banished to what were called ‘lunatic asylums.’ In an earlier age, people who displayed behavioural problems were suspected of being witches and were either burned at the stake or incarcerated in jails for the rest of their lives.

These days we understand so much more about brain chemistry, and how the slightest imbalance in that area can cause uncontrollable physical reactions. We now know how emotional stress can manifest itself externally through mood swings, depression, migraine, and skin eruptions. We also understand so much more today about the complexity and psychology of the human being and about psychosomatics, the interrelationship of our mental and physical states. It will be of interest to note that while this has only been acknowledged in the last hundred years, Maimonides was already aware of this connection in the 12th century.

His writings in the field, as published in his *The Regimen of Health*, were regarded as so significant that a Latin edition was published in 1477, among the earliest medical treatises to appear after the invention of printing. In his third chapter he makes the connection between mind and body, arguing that physical health is dependent upon an equally supportive mental health system. His holistic approach embraced mindfulness (combined with a herbal prescription) to reduce anxiety and stress, as well as diet and exercise.

We are, in the main, so much more tolerant and sympathetic towards people with ‘stress-related problems,’ since we realise that most of the world’s population suffers in some measure, and at any given time, from its effects, given the unprecedented stresses of modern living and the breakdown of family life. As we know, Covid-19 has emphasized this inextricable link between the physical and the mental aspects of our lives.

When a scholar suffers from dementia or memory loss it is especially evident and sad, and the contrast between his former state of intellectual agility and instant recall and his current state of unresponsiveness is particularly acute. When a Torah sage falls victim to Alzheimer’s and can no

longer even recite the *Shema*, or when a university professor can no longer even recognise his family, it is more than pitiful, not only for them but also for society which has been deprived of their unique contribution. In a past age they were neglected and left to 'vegetate.' Today they are cared for and stimulated to maximise whatever of their potential remains.

It should be a source of pride to us that our sages already understood the problem and empathised with sufferers some two thousand years ago, and that Maimonides promoted mental health as a prerequisite for physical health. The fact that both the complete as well as the fractured tablets were given the same place of honour in the Sanctuary's Ark is a powerful message to Jewish society to extend sympathy and a helping hand to all who are 'broken' in body or spirit.

Under Covid, our younger generation has learnt the hard way how vulnerable all human beings are and how easily and suddenly our lives can be tragically overturned. This, in turn, should motivate them to be grateful for each and every day of good health that they enjoy and to live a lifestyle that enhances it. That is surely the greatest blessing of all!

POSTSCRIPT:

For those who are not averse to poetry, see below for a poem I wrote for Mental Health Awareness Day a few years ago. If you've previously received this, please ignore it, with my apologies.

‘‘I’m not a run-of-the-mill type’’

By Jeffrey M Cohen

Endorsements

Individuals with a mental disorder reading your poem, or families of individuals with mental disorder, would I believe find validation, empathy and hope in the piece you have written – and would I believe think, yes that rings true – I have felt that.

Dr Jeremy Beider, Psychiatrist

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I have read the poem closely. I feel it is evocative and powerful in its description of the isolation and terrible fears many mental health illness patients suffer… I think it is a wonderful poem, enabling those who have no understanding of, or contact with, people with mental health illness to have an idea of the torment sufferers live with...I very much like the distribution of the stanza’s, the rhythm within each and their variable length as you use the rhythm within each to evoke the feelings and emotions of the ill child at different stages as they describe themselves. Similarly, the scattered use of consonance adds a vivid sense of fracture to the child’s life as they struggle through the day within the unpredictability of their illness.

Dr Nigel de Kare-Silver, Medical Practitioner

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I have worked in the field of mental health for close to 20 years. Your way with words really demonstrated the impact of mental ill health on the person and those involved in their life. It was a powerful read from multiple perspectives.

Ms Rachel Yona

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As you are aware, I am a Mental Health and Addictions Counsellor. There are multiple different mental disorders, each with its own individual pattern of symptoms, but each with the common denominator of the individual “feeling different” and “not fitting in”. This is an excellent descriptor of the anguish felt by a person with a mental illness.

Annette Links, Canada.

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‘‘I’m not a run-of-the-mill type’’

‘I’m in a mess, mum!
It’s doing my head;
Throughout the day—
And when I’m in bed.

I look at my school friends
Larking about,
Carefree and happy,
So much to spout,
While I sneak away,
Afraid they might say:
‘What is it with you
That you don’t ever play!?’

They don’t understand
How different I am;
How, for their world,
I don’t give a damn;
The shade,
I embrace;
Shadows,
I chase;
Into the deep,
I’m desperate
To leap.

Sure, I’ve had friends,
But they drifted away;
Their glances more telling
Than what they might say.

I tried to join in
With a game, one day;
Kicking a football
On a causeway.

‘What’s up with you’—
Screamed one on our side—
‘Standing there,
Mummified?
Get in there and tackle,
Watch the game,
Move your foot—
Or are you lame?’

Maybe I am—
I thought to myself;
My legs are leaden,
I’m not in good health;
I’m feeling confused…
Which way do I kick?

Are they coming to hurt me?—

I'm sweating;

I'm sick!

At supper that night,

I couldn't eat;

Was the dish a fish,

Or was it mincemeat?

Either way,

I felt replete.

Then it stared at me,

And bared its teeth;

Growing ever larger,

Above and beneath.

I screamed and yelled,

Help me, someone!

Mum and dad soothed,

'It's alright, son;

You've got a fever,

You need some sleep;

Tonight, you won't need

To count any sheep!'

The symptoms continued—

Even got worse;

My hallucinations

Became diverse;

I desperately felt

I had to flee;

Everyone looks at me

Frostily;

My view of things

They just don't see.

Yet, there were days

When I jumped for joy,

Just like I did

As a little boy

When I felt no pain

And was really loved;

When no one bullied

And no one shoved.

Did I ever mention

To you 'the other'?

That's the name

I give to my brother

Who doesn't look me in the eye,

But derives his pleasure

From making me cry;

He tells me

I'm a worthless sucker,

That, if I'm lucky,

I'll become a trucker!

He's twenty,
And can do no wrong;
When he comes in
Mum breaks into song.

'Why can't you be
The same as your brother?'—
An inner voice calls,
Smother! Smother!
Voices, voices,
In my head;
Voices that I love—
And dread!

'Your brother's
A college lad,
You know;
He's got friends
That come and go;
There's no sport
He doesn't play;
He's off to the gym
Every day.
And look at all the exams
He's passed;
For a great future
He's forecast;
He comes with me
On Sabbath
To pray;
And, unlike you,
He's not gay!'

Our school is on
A busy road;
Drivers don't follow
The Highway Code;
The Zebra Crossing's
Not for me;
The Zebra jumps up—
And I must flee.

My heart races,
I gather pace;
The Zebra's faster
As it gives chase;
With prams and people
I collide,
Though the pavement is
Quite clear and wide;
I hear them shouting,
'Stop that lad!

He’s a menace;

He’s quite mad!’

Do you really wonder

That I skip school,

With its grand façade

And vestibule;

Its strutting staff,

And ceaseless noise;

The fervent flirting

Of girls and boys?

What did I gain

When I *did* attend;

Invisibly,

My way,

I’d wend?

Loneliness,

Is my name;

For everything

I’d bear the blame.

When dad walked out,

And never came back,

I was the one

To take the flak.

‘Home-breaker,’

Was the name

I earned;

Into my soul

It was burned.

Doctors’ visits, medication,

Diets, detoxification,

Stress-disorder, phobia—

Or was it schizophrenia?

Stabilisers, palpitation,

A friend’s drug-experimentation,

Social workers,

Aggravation,

Trauma,

Desensitisation;

Eating disorder

And depression;

Dragged from one

To another session

Of analysts and therapists,

And specialist psychiatrists—

If they could get

Inside my mind,

It’s a black hole

That they would find!

Why is life

So terribly hard;
Why am I
Its wild-card?
I sometimes think
I'll end it all
And turn my face
To the wall;
And then I'll find
The peace I seek—
But voices tell me
I'm too weak!

But, I'm not weak,
I'm strong as steel;
I won't be bent
Over life's wheel;
And if my mind is not at rest,
I'm in the company
Of the best
Of history's hall of fame—
Too numerous
To list by name.

So, I'm not
A run-of-the-mill type;
I've got potential
Of rare stripe;
And, helped by therapies
Prescribed,
Among life's winners,
I'll be inscribed;
If I but affirm
The life I lead,
And seek the help
I know I'll need;
Aware of the talent
At my core,
I'll scale the height's
Of life's credit score.

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