

More Love
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My mom is my hero. As many of you know, she was born in pre-State Israel in 1940, almost 73 years ago. She grew up on kibbutz *Ein Gev*, on the Sea of Galilee; and served in the Israeli army before immigrating to Los Angeles, with her family, at the age of twenty. Although I wasn't even a glimmer in her eye, that is always how I picture my mom, as that soldier in the old black and white photographs of her youth. She is so beautiful. With a long, thick blond braid hanging down her back; sparkling, deep brown eyes; a tanned, fit body from being outdoors in the hot desert sun; taking target practice with her military issue rifle; and doing the exacting work of folding parachutes, just so, in order that the *tsanchanim*, the elite paratroopers, would land accurately and safely at their destinations.

Mom is the strongest person I know, not only in body, but, more importantly, in mind and in spirit. She didn't have much formal education beyond High School, but she possesses more brains and common sense than most of us with graduate school degrees, myself included. And she is amazingly resilient. She survived a bad marriage to my father and raised two children on her own, doing low-level clerical jobs at first and working her way up to bookkeeper and then office manager over the years. I would describe us as lower middle-class, but somehow, between her careful savings and self-taught investment skills, she managed to afford the necessities of life and, more recently, a nice vacation every few years. She always had lots of good friends, several long-term love affairs, and a second passionate, but also challenging marriage.

Yet no matter the ups and downs of life, she took pride in her accomplishments and independence, doing everything she enjoyed from taking long daily walks to hiking the Santa Monica mountains; from classical music concerts to world travel. She was rewarded with two successful and content daughters and, as many of you can relate, two grandchildren, who are the lights of her life. Now she enjoys living between homes in Santa Monica, California, and *Mevasseret*, a lovely town in the Judean Mountains just north of Jerusalem. About three years ago, as a birthday present to herself for her seventieth, she joined our OST trip in Israel and climbed the grueling snake path up to Masada, along with several other septuagenarians, and quite a few sexagenarians as well.

My mom has always been an inspiration to me of all that can be accomplished with a can-do attitude, determination and a free spirit. She also suffers from depression. And this last year has been a particularly difficult one for her . . . and, as you can imagine, for me. My mom has been struggling with several health issues none of which, thank God, is life-threatening, but, piled one on top of another, are absolutely life-limiting and life-altering. Every trip to Los Angeles, including my Sabbatical last fall, has been spent going with her from one doctor to another in order to determine the best course of treatment for two bouts of breast cancer; extremely painful spinal stenosis and rotoscoliosis; impairment of vision to name just a few. Compounded by watching her only, and beloved, sister suffer the

devastating aftermath of Leukemia treatment, the result has been dramatic, inexplicable weight loss; feelings of loneliness and despair; and, ultimately, thoughts of suicide. Indeed, just weeks before these High Holidays, as you kindly and well intentioned asked about my mom's health, she was in a psychiatric hospital refusing to speak to any family members including me.

To say I was devastated and felt utterly helpless is an understatement. Here I was, thousands of miles away, making pastoral calls to the sick, visiting hospital rooms, burying loved ones, and I couldn't help my own mother. As I counseled you about matters of love and loss and life and death, I lamented that I couldn't reach her deep within. Did I not listen well and enough? Was I at fault for choosing my calling and career over my home and family? Could I have done more? And, of course, the awful dread, "What will I do if I lose her?"

In preparing for this sermon, I learned that my mom, and we who care for and about her, are not alone in our suffering. NAMI, the National Alliance of Mental Illness, estimates that one in four adults, approximately 62 million Americans, and four million of our children, experience mental illness in a given year. About 14 million of us live with a serious mental illness such as schizophrenia, major depression or bipolar disorder. If we do the math, in our congregation of 750 families, numbering roughly 2000 individuals, some 500 of us are afflicted annually, not only with anxiety and depression, but also with ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder), ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), Learning Disabilities and any one of the many forms of Autism. Others are beset by Dementia, Paranoia and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. And still many others suffer the anguish of Substance Abuse, Eating Disorders, PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome) which is particularly common in our military families, and, God forbid, Suicide. And these are just some, among many other, diagnosed mental illnesses identified by the DMS4, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, which is used by clinicians and psychiatrists to diagnose psychiatric illnesses.

And to compound your pain and suffering, most of you are too ashamed to talk about it. You will confide in me about awful physical challenges and illnesses, but, if you tell me at all, you whisper that you or your loved one is depressed; getting help from a therapist; or taking medication for your, or their, condition. I understand. Discrimination toward mental illness comes from everywhere: friends, family, insurance companies, schools, businesses, even churches and synagogues. In his book, *Telling is Risky Business*, author and sociologist Thomas Scheff explains: "Those given psychiatric labels . . . are seen as different from others -- weak and flawed, less capable and less competent, with undesirable characteristics such as dangerousness and poor grooming. Their opinions and feelings, presumed clouded by mental confusion, are not respected. [The stigma of] mental illness . . . casts doubt on the labeled person's ability to be a good parent, [friend], spouse, employee, or even citizen (p.13)." The book is filled with stories of people who lost friends; who were rejected and abandoned by family members who wish they had been born "normal;" whose congregations and communities turned their backs on them. Called names, accused, blamed, judged, silenced or ignored, the more ashamed others were of them, the more ashamed they felt of themselves.

I can appreciate why it is so hard for us to deal with our friends and loved one's emotional frailties or diseases, let alone our own. Not only are they among the most debilitating, but mental illnesses are also insidious because they are not well understood and are most difficult to diagnose and treat. Although we know intellectually that it is not our fault, or that of our loved ones, we want them to stop taking themselves so seriously and snap out of it; or to control themselves and stop drugging or lose weight; or to try harder and "get" already whatever it is they are struggling to learn; or to cheer up and just get out of bed. We have tried to help them so many times before and been hurt or disappointed over and over again, and don't know where to turn or what to say or do anymore, making our own impatience and our frustration with them even worse.

Somewhere, somehow, the notion has been ingrained in us that we should be able to figure our way out of any situation; that we ought to be tough enough to overcome any obstacles; that we are stronger than, smarter than, more able than any problem we confront. Financial setbacks, divorces, illnesses, even death, we deal with them, right!?! We work them out. We make a new deal or get a new job. We figure out how to live on our own or find a new partner. We get well or learn to live with our disabilities. We mourn and then act as if we are okay until we are. But somehow this is different. With mental illnesses we can't just fix them and, often we feel like failures, because we can't simply flip a switch and make ourselves, or those we love, better.

Not surprisingly, then, in spite of its pervasiveness, so many suffer in silence. With 60% of adults and 50% of children untreated, many of our mentally ill are homeless, wandering the streets, living in shelters, and showing up at our soup kitchen, and those of many other churches and missions, for a daily meal. Others are effectively homebound, living with parents or guardians or on their own, invisible to the rest of us, isolating themselves from the world for months and years on end. Yet there are many who manage to function, contributing much to society while hiding their pain. They are mothers and fathers loving their children the best they can; they are teachers educating us in our schools and colleges; they are doctors and nurses offering us healing in their offices and hospitals; they are successful lawyers and business people brokering multi-million dollar deals; and they are volunteers for every charity and cause you can imagine trying to do their small part to make the world better.

They are everywhere, even on this very bema. For as you can imagine, along with the bullying that I endured as a child, about which I spoke last *Rosh Hashanah*, as well as heredity and adolescent hormone changes -- along with them came depression. Like so many others, especially teens, I thought that I was all alone in my darkness; but I was fortunate to get the therapy and the medication I needed to emerge whole. I was lucky that I had the love of my family. My parents didn't understand what I was going through, but they held me tight and never gave up on me. Their presence wasn't enough to heal me, but their love helped immeasurably. How I wish I had known that mental illness runs in my family, and that there had not been a stigma against talking about it, so that I could have sought treatment sooner and avoided years of struggle and suffering, of blaming myself for not being able to "get over it" and just be happy!

Even now, knowing all that I do, no one is harder on me than I am. As I wrote in my bulletin article this month, "there are wrongdoings that most of us are far more guilty of than hurting others and for which repentance or atonement is perhaps often even more difficult; these are the sins we commit against ourselves. We failed to take care of ourselves; we berated ourselves mercilessly for a mistake we made; we blamed ourselves for things that were not in our control; we accepted someone else's negative opinion of us as truth; we refused to see the good that we did."

And I know from the many, many hours we have spent together sharing our stories, that I am not alone. That is why, for this New Year, I proposed an additional process of *Teshuvah*, of atonement. Rather than focusing solely on what we've done wrong or failed to do or the way in which we have harmed others, I suggested a process of personal transformation: that we consider all of the things we have done well and right; that we take genuine pride and joy in having done them; that we honor ourselves for the good we did – forgiving ourselves for where we fell short and rewarding ourselves with something healthy and non-material that makes us feel better; that we resolve to strive to acknowledge our strengths, positive characteristics and goodness always. And how will we know if we've successfully completed the process? The next time that critical voice starts playing the familiar "I'm no good" tape, we simply turn it off.

I know it is easier said than done. In her article, "Finding Beauty in your Scars (*tinybuddha.com*)," Alexandra Heather Foss writes: "Emotional pain is slow to heal as I have been slow to heal. My healing started with a word I received as a birthday gift. It was a photograph my friend took of a forest, the word "forgive" painted in pink on a stone. I didn't understand why that word meant something until I really started to think about it.

I blamed myself for so long for things that weren't my fault. Life stopped being beautiful to me, I stopped feeling beautiful inside, and my smile stopped shining beauty out into the world. I think in order for us to make life beautiful we need to feel our smiles as we feel our frowns. For so long, I honored only my pain and my sorrow. I lost my smile, less because of the trauma and more because I spent so much time lamenting my scars. When I decided they were beautiful, I became beautiful. When I took power away from the negative emotions, my unchangeable traumatic past, I was better able to find joy in the present . . . I realized . . . beauty is my purpose for existence. My purpose is to make whatever I can beautiful. Not beautiful in the superficial sense but in the smile of the heart and soul sense. Thus far, it's working. Sometimes all it takes for your life to change is a shift in perspective, one solitary action, one solitary word, and everything is different—an action like a smile, a word like forgive . . .

When bad things happen, we don't instinctively feel happy and beautiful, but we don't need to despair because life gets ugly sometimes. Joy and beauty are everywhere, in everything, in every one of us—no matter how we look, and no matter how we may hurt temporarily. Grace is beauty in motion and we can create it by choosing to smile—to recognize that we are strong, despite our insecurities, and the world is an amazing place, despite its tragedies. We may hurt, but we will heal—and there's beauty in our scars."

Acknowledging the beauty, grace and strength that exists in our scars is the message of my favorite *midrash* or rabbinic teaching. When asked what happened to the original set of tablets Moses smashed into bits, the rabbis responded that they were carried in the Holy Ark along with the new set. In other words, the broken pieces of our lives, the sum total of all of our experiences, make up who we are. Without them, we wouldn't be ourselves -- funny, passionate, sensitive, gracious, kind, successful, loving and a myriad of other characteristics that make us both whole and holy.

Indeed, there is much wisdom and solace in traditional Judaism all of which teaches us to be more compassionate, not only with ourselves, but also with others. The Talmud, dating back to the 6th century, tells of a certain Rabbi Eliezer who lies in bed in complete darkness, weeping uncontrollably. One day he is visited by his friend, Rabbi Jochanan ben Zakki, who pulls up a chair next to the bed, and, for a long time, sits in the dark next to his friend in silence. And then he says, "Eliezer, why are you crying? Why don't you get out of bed? Is it because you haven't studied enough Torah? Because you're not wealthy enough? Because there is something wrong in your life? We all have something in our life that isn't perfect!" Eliezer turns to him and says, "No, I'm not upset because I'm not smarter or richer or perfect; I'm crying because life is full of so much beauty and in my darkness I see none of it." Jochanan ben Zakki looks at his friend and says, "For that, we can weep together." And so they cried. And then Jochanan ben Zakki says, "Can you, will you, let me help you?" to which Eliezer answers, "I'll try." So Jochanan ben Zakki takes his friend Eliezer's hand and brings him out of the room, toward light and healing.

The story moves us for many reasons. Certainly the rabbis didn't know the words "depression" or "mental illness," but they understood that people who are in this state of darkness, despondent and ashamed, need help. Jochanan ben Zakki's sitting and being present with his friend shows us they knew that love and friendship were healing. Even when his friend says nothing, he is with him. Even when he is not sure his friend can take the help that's offered, Jochanan ben Zakki still extends his hand. Like him, we can call. We can visit. We can sit with our loved ones and friends in darkness and silence. We can be present . . . even if we are afraid or uncomfortable, even if we don't understand, even if we have no idea what to say. And if it is we who lie in darkness, as terrifying and uncertain as it is, we can allow those who love and care for us to sit with us and take our hands and lead us into the light; they may not be able to cure us, but they can surely offer us comfort, friendship, love and, God- willing, healing.

As members of a sacred community of faith, we can do the same for our fellow congregants who are clearly suffering. We can be a place where people don't have to lie about their struggles or pretend they are okay when they are not -- that their marriage is happy, their children successful, their careers thriving, that all is sunny, when inside they are falling apart. We can practice religion at its best, erasing the artificial barriers between the healthy and the sick and envisioning a spectrum on which each of us falls and along which each of us travels -- sometimes stronger, sometimes weaker, sometimes able to give and sometimes deeply in need of care, all of us sharing in this network of interdependence and mutual support. We can have a broad and generous vision of the human condition: not rejecting those who display

unusual behavior; fostering patience and acceptance of those who don't conform to convention; providing opportunities for all members to contribute and to rise to the best that they can be; and honoring the image of God, the spark of sacred individuality within every person, the inner spirit that struggles towards wholeness and health. Failures of chemistry are challenges for the medical profession to address. Our sights as a religious community need to be focused elsewhere: on shaping character and heart and soul; on cultivating compassion, diminishing isolation; and on building a congregation that is human and holy. We know we will never banish illness from this world, but as Jews it is our responsibility to do everything we can to relieve the pain ("A Jewish Perspective on Mental Illness," presented to *Yehi Or* Conference, Rabbi Janet Marder, December 11, 2005).

This is the reason that I chose to speak to you tonight about my mother's struggle with mental illness (which she gave me permission to do) and my own -- because I want to eradicate the shame associated with these diseases and take away our discomfort in acknowledging them, talking about them and getting treatment for them. I want to show you that I've been there too, that I understand your struggles -- the ups and downs and triumphs and travails of life. Standing before you as your teacher and spiritual leader on the holiest night of the year, I want you to see that I am living proof that we can live with these life challenges and prevail; that I am more than okay today; that I am happy, healthy, whole and fulfilled.

Our weaknesses, our struggles and our scars don't have to undo us; instead, they can be sacred wounds, which can come to heal us and others and provide us with a sacred calling or gift. Our experiences can make us more able to give and receive love; more appreciative of needing to care for ourselves and others; more sensitive to our own and others' vulnerabilities and needs; more conscientious of the value of family and friends, of community and faith. I know they did that for me and, without the sum total of my life experiences, the bitter with the sweet, I would not be the human being or the rabbi that I am. For all of it, for all of you, I am so very grateful

And I want you to know, that as a person of reason and great faith, I fully believe that everything is going to be all right for my mom. She is at home now, not cured, but, very slowly, doing better. The depression is still there, but it is no longer as dark or debilitating. Each day, she does what she can to get better, seeing a therapist, trying medication, taking morning walks, and reaching out to family and friends. I call often, mostly just to listen, and, when she is hard on herself, I remind her that she is improving, little by little; that she is functioning, maybe not the way she is used to, and that is okay; that she is beautiful, just the way she is and that she is very much loved. Mom is strong of body, mind and spirit; I am hopeful, that with the medical treatment she is receiving, her resiliency, our love and God's help, she will find her well self again. And I pray that with your strength, the love of those who surround you, this caring congregation and community of faith and God's help, that you, and those you love, will also find your way back to healing, health and wholeness again.

When asked by a distraught father what he should do with his troubled son, the famous Chasidic Rabbi, the Baal Shem Tov, said, "Love him more." Open your hearts, be present, patient and compassionate, love him more. More love -- now that

is surely something we can resolve to give ourselves and others in the New Year, more love. For in loving those nearest to us, we are doing God's work and fulfilling our reason for being as Jews and human beings. In the words of a dear classmate and colleague: For "God has no other hands than ours. If the sick are to be healed, it is our hands, not God's that will heal them. If the lonely and the frightened are to be comforted, it is our embrace, not God's that will comfort them. The warmth of the sun travels on the air, but the warmth of God's love can travel only through each one of us" [R. Kirschner]. This year, may it be so. Amen.