

Most mornings I start my day by reading articles in a particular national news magazine, noted for excellent writing and quality research. I want to be informed, and I like to understand the issues we face. But I have noticed a change in myself, in the last few years. After I have spent some time reading in the morning, I find myself feeling deflated and hopeless. Having become more informed, I am now overwhelmed by, well, simply everything. I'm deflated by all the ways that AI can undermine humanity. I am anguishing over whether my children will ever be able to buy homes, or achieve financial security. Some days these feel like "first world problems", because of the existential threats that loom larger. Will the world sink into chaos at the hands of powerful autocrats? Or will the cataclysmic climate crisis doom us, long before that? Gone are the good ol' days, when I used to lose sleep over nuclear proliferation. Nukes may be a real threat, but they are about #5 on my list of pressing disasters facing humanity. All of this, and I haven't even made it to my first cup of coffee yet.

It feels like a perfect storm of woes jumped out of a Pandora's box in the last decade, to destabilize so much of what felt stable in our world. Populism, pandemic, anti-Semitism, intolerance for people who are different. There are no common truths, and integrity has lost its value. Capitalism has run amok, and compassion has run out. No wonder the rate of depression has doubled in the last decade.

It is no wonder that so many of us are anxious, so many of us are depressed. It is not without good cause. I share this with you, because I know I am not alone. I have felt that growing anxiety in myself the last few years, and there is not a soul I've talked to that doesn't experience it as well, at some level.

"Mental health is now the defining public health crisis of our time", says U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy.<sup>1</sup> While rates of depression have declined since the pandemic ended, it is still sobering to hear that almost 1 in 5 adults say they have suffered from depression, a rate that has doubled in the last decade.<sup>2</sup> Of teens, 15-18% report suffering from anxiety or depression.<sup>3</sup> Richard Friedman, the former director of mental health at Cornell University, said in 2016—notably before the pandemic impacted college campuses-- that the number of college students seeking help had been increasing by 10-15 % each year.<sup>4</sup> One of the things that I take pride in as a Jew, is that as a group, we are one of the most proactive groups to address health problems, to seek medical help, and to support our children through illness. So let us begin by acknowledging that we as Jews are no strangers to depression. Depression is known to be an inherited trait, that is generational in families. Those of us who are Ashkenazic Jews have an inherited gene that makes us 40% more likely to develop schizophrenia, and manic depression,

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<sup>1</sup> Time Magazine, 6/12/23 p. 14

<sup>2</sup> 2023 State of Mental Health in America, published by Mental Health America

<sup>3</sup> " "

<sup>4</sup> Atlantic Monthly, 9/2023, "The Resilience Gap" by Jill Filipovic, pg. 10

or bi-polar disorder.<sup>5</sup> We Jews can address our inherited mental diseases even more proactively, just as we do with inherited physical issues like Crohn's disease, cystic fibrosis or Tay-Sachs. And depression is also psychosocial, based on stress factors like trauma experiences, the death of a parent, divorce, financial worries, isolation and abuse; like all the stress going on in society right now. During the pandemic we all became more isolated as we sheltered in place and had fewer interactions with people. This increased anxiety and depression for people of all ages. Our acknowledgement of and openness in addressing depression changes the public conversation and creates more openness in communities where stigmas run deep. Our openness helps us help ourselves, our family members, and others. When we address depression, we save lives.

One of the most influential and beloved Chasidic leaders of all time was Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, born in 1772 in a village in Ukraine. His writings have transcended the confines of the Hasidic world, in part because of Reb Nachman's excursions in nature. The truth is that Nachman, who traveled through the world and made Aliyah to Israel- suffered greatly, and moderns believe that Nachman had bi-polar disorder. His forays into the natural world around him were to quiet his mind, remove him from people, and strengthen his bonds with God, very much the source of his strength. We don't know if his depression was inherited, or if it was brought about by the challenges of his life- 4 of his 8 children died as infants, and his wife Sasha died of tuberculosis on the eve of Shavout, which indeed triggered a deep depression for Nachman. Depression did not stop Nachman from being a teacher, and a spiritualist who inspired thousands in his day, and thousands more through the generations. At times, Nachman addressed the tension between depression and joy, encouraging those who wrestled to never give up hope: "everyone needs to take care to always be able to feel joy, and to be mindful of the need to distance oneself from deep sadness/depression...And even if when he begins to look within himself, he sees that there is no goodness within him, and that he is all full of sins, and he is tempted to fall into a deep depression, *has v'shalom*, he is forbidden from allowing himself to fall into a depression from this. Rather, he must seek to find in himself some little bit of good, for how is it possible that in all his days, he didn't do some mitzvah, or some good deed?"<sup>6</sup> Reb Nachman gives us insight into one who struggles with depression, the inner feeling of lacking self-worth, and not being able to see the good that is within themselves or around them. So how do we help someone who struggles with depression? How do we ask for help ourselves, when we are struggling?

Remarkably, living before the dawn of psychotherapy, Reb. Nachman gives us sound advice about where to start. Those who feel depressed have a hard time seeing any good in their lives. We should notice that deep sadness, and this is our opening to talking honestly. And by talking, I mean listening. Not talking someone out of how they feel, or debating someone, but being able to remind someone about their positive qualities and how much they mean to

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.haaretz.com/2013-11-26/ty-article/.premium/ashkenazi-gene-increases-schizophrenia>

<sup>6</sup> Luikutey Moharan 1:282

you and others is an important affirmation. It is what opens the door to encouraging them to seek treatment- reminding them of how important they are to you. Rabbi Nachman taught, “Sometimes, people are terribly distressed but have no one to whom they can unburden themselves. If you come along with a listening heart, you uplift them and help them find new life.” We can be the listening heart for those we love.

Whether we are dealing with anxiety or depression, the need to step away from the tension and stress that is part of our lives is real. Releasing stress is how we cope with life. For some of us, engaging in sports, or exercise is that release, that keeps us in a place of wellness. For some of us, time in nature renews our soul, taps into our spirituality, let’s us de-stress. One of the most famous pieces of Nachman’s writing is this prayer: “... may it be my custom to go outdoors each day among the trees and grass - among all growing things and there may I be alone, and enter into prayer, to talk with the One to whom I belong. May I express there everything in my heart, and may all the foliage of the field - all grasses, trees, and plants - awake at my coming, to send the powers of their life into the words of my prayer so that my prayer and speech are made whole through the life and spirit of all growing things, which are made as one by their transcendent Source. May I then pour out the words of my heart before your Presence like water, O God...” Nachman gave us the model of drawing strength from nature itself- and of finding a safe, quiet place, away from the stress of our lives, to simply articulate our thoughts aloud before the Everpresent One – a practice we now call *hitbodedut*, pouring out our heart before God.

How do we help our family members, our friends, our children, when they struggle? Beyond the listening heart, and the encouragement to find ways to de-stress, we can check that we do not blame the one experiencing depression. We can help them find good therapists to work with on addressing their problems, to help them understand and perhaps change their emotional responses to the instances that cause them stress. And we cope by turning to community.

One of the indicators of depression is the instinct to reject socializing. After 2 years of pandemic, many of us have found it darn convenient to stay at home, to avoid social situations. It is true there are rising covid numbers right now- but we can choose to be in public places with a mask. The shadow side to the pandemic is that many of us got very comfortable staying at home, not making the effort to see people and go out, beyond the immediate circle of family and friends. Perhaps we have gotten lazy, perhaps we have found the convenience of online programming and streaming, but what we have given up is community. And I would like to suggest that this “new normal” opens the door for more anxiety about society, and more depression. What we have given up, quite unintentionally, is the entire unscripted experience of socializing, of making small talk with someone at the oneg, of connecting with others as we chat in the lobby before an adult learning class. These interactions lift our spirits, encourage us to go beyond our essential interactions. They change our sense about who we are in the world, re-affirming that we are active and vital members of a community. And they reaffirm that the

world and the people in it are essentially good; allaying the negativity that compounds when we are alone, and too much media and social media fill our days. Researchers say that being in a community is one big thing you can do to fight depression.

There is another important way of being in community, that is a way of coping with depression. Helping others actually makes us happier. I recently spoke with a woman whose husband had died. She took herself back to the food bank where she and her husband had volunteered in the past. Yea, it was hard to go and be paired up with another volunteer, she said. But it felt good to connect with something that had been meaningful to her and her husband, and to get out of being alone in the house. It was good for her, and she DID good, too. Helping others takes us away from our troubles and helps us focus on the present moment as we help; it brings relief to us as well as to those we are helping by taking our mind off of ourselves and onto others.

If we can talk about Ashkenazi Jews being at a higher risk for depression, than we must also address, that our children are at a 25-30% higher risk for encountering depression too.<sup>7</sup> There is not a parent around who isn't keeping an eye on their children's mental health, in light of the pandemic, and the stress of returning to schools where there is academic pressure, children who are behind on social development, and the ubiquitous concern about the role of social media on mental wellbeing. For all parents- our goals should be to talk openly with our kids about how they are feeling, monitor what gives them stress, and how they respond to it, keep them connected to family and friends, activities, and not be shut away with too much unregulated computer or social media time. Their privacy does not trump your taking care of their mental health. Studies have found that using social media can contribute to anxiety, depression and lower self-esteem among children and teens, and expose them to harassment and abuse, says a report published in May by the U.S. Attorney General Murthy. Excessive social media use can possibly change the brain in ways that mimic addiction. John Fetterman the Senator from Pennsylvania who suffered a stroke last year, and, then experienced debilitating depression, wrote about his illness, "I really couldn't articulate to myself, what was going on." It was only with inpatient treatment for 6 weeks at Walter Reed Medical Center, therapy and medication, that he was able to return to his family, his career and his constituents. One of his choices was to give up social media because of its relentless negativity. One does not need to be a teen to think seriously about monitoring the impact of social media on our mental well-being.

My friends, I know you are going to walk out of here, and a few of you may rightfully quip, "well that was the most depressing Rosh Hashanah sermon I've ever heard." But what I hope more of you will say is, "well, that may have been the most close-to-home Rosh Hashanah sermon I've heard. And I feel a bit more empowered. For me, I'm moderating my reading of a news magazine first thing in the morning. " Psychotherapists now believe that the role of a faith community can be an important coping mechanism, if that faith community offers support and

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<sup>7</sup> <https://lilith.org/articles/manic-depression-and-jews/>

understanding and not judgement or a belief that depression is a god-sent ailment.<sup>8</sup> Nothing could be further than the truth in this Jewish community, where our faith affirms a loving, Present God. In fact, it was Reb Nachman who wrote, “on the day you were born was the day that God decided the world could not exist without you.” Reb Nachman taught, “The whole world is a very narrow bridge and the most important part is to walk on even though one is afraid...” Let us be here to hold hands, and walk with each other, for if we do...we make the bridge a much wider one for all of us to cross. L’shana tova.

Please consider these Resources for yourself and friends, family:

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: [988lifeline.org](http://988lifeline.org)

Ventura County Crisis team 866-998-2243 (24 hour phone line and mobile crisis team)

Psychology Today -- Free Website for finding a therapist that includes a bio on all the therapist in your area, insurances accepted and their specialties: [Psychologytoday.com](http://Psychologytoday.com)

Ventura County Psychological Association: [Venturacountypsych.com](http://Venturacountypsych.com) Community Resources

The Trevor Project: 866-488-7386 or [thetrevorproject.org](http://thetrevorproject.org)

NAMI: National Alliance on Mental Illness- Kids, Teens and Young Adults

With gratitude to Rabbi Eli Freedman:

<https://rodephshalom.org/rabbi-nachman-and-mental-illness-erev-rosh-hashanah-5775>

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/psychology/coping-strategies#:~:text=There%20are%20many%20different%20conceptualizations,religious%20coping%2C%20and%20meaning%20making.>