

A source of blessing, a source of strength, a sanctuary of comfort, a healer, that is what we call You, O God, when we pray for healing. These words we just prayed, for many, are the most significant piece of our Shabbat service, we feel empowered, we feel comforted knowing that we have asked God to grant healing and wholeness to the people we love. But what is it that we seek when we pray these words? Our prayer reminds us that we hope for *r'fuat haguf*, healing of body and *r'fuat hanefesh*, healing of soul and mind. There are two sides of healing. We are so often concerned with those who stricken with physical illness and at the same time we are well aware of the hidden challenges that so many of our loved ones face each day of our lives. These challenges are mental illnesses that cause pain and suffering to so many Americans. Mental Illness has had a stigma in our society for generations. But we have come a long way from the days of placing those who are mentally ill in asylums. However, there is still more that can be done to help the people we love find a sanctuary when they struggle.

Our Torah reads this week *v'asu li mikdash v'shachanti b'tocham*, build me a sanctuary so that I may dwell among the people. These words are central to our people, in that building sacred places is our calling. Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, a leading Chasidic rabbi from the 18th century teaches, "This is what humanity is all about; this is the purpose of creation and of the creation of all the worlds, higher and lower--that there be made for God a dwelling in the lower realms." The lower realm is accessible to us on a daily basis. It is what we see in the world, it is how we feel about the world. We can reach out and touch it. The lower realm is how we react to others, it is the community to which we belong. This lower realm is filled with great possibility, things can be unholy, mundane, or they can be sacred, holy, special and unique.

We find ourselves mired in this spectrum in so many aspects of our lives. Are we happy or sad? Are we right or wrong? Are we sick or healthy? When we are not well, we look to be cured, but there are many sicknesses that have no cure. As we encounter them we can change our thinking to understand that what we seek is not a cure, what we seek is wholeness, we yearn for a sense of shalom in our lives. The path to this wholeness comes through the creation of sacred space, and like the *mikdash*, the holy tabernacle, it requires people to give sacred gifts.

When we reach out to the people we love, we are in fact building sacred space. The act of expressing love, showing love, giving love to others is building that sacred place. Helping others find *r'fuat hanefesh*, healing of mind and soul is building a sanctuary, it is building a sacred place for the people we love. This is our challenge, building a sacred space for the people we love. The Torah gives a detailed plan about how we build the physical space of the tabernacle, but building a sanctuary for those who are mentally ill cannot be laid out in some plan.

In order to make a plan, in order to build a sanctuary for those we care about, it is important to hear their stories. In recent months, I have heard similar stories from people, who have aging parents. Often Dementia and Alzheimer's are at the heart of their struggle. Their words include the following tag lines, "My dad has become a shell of what he once was." "My mom no longer recognizes me, I miss the person who she was. She was such an important part of my life." "My kids are scared to visit, because they don't know what Grandpa will say or do." Each of these comments contains the emotion of loss. The sanctuary of what was safe and comfortable that they found in their loved

one has come down. For the family members of those who suffer we have to build those walls so that we can create that sacred space.

As we think about the notion of sacred space for these family members we also know that there are so many individuals who face depression, anxiety disorders, and bipolar disorders. By listening to the following words, we can gain a better understanding of the mindset of those who confront mental illness every day:

I cried out to you and you healed me,

You brought me up from down below

And you didn't let me go deeper into the pit.

When I was untroubled, I thought I will never be shaken (Psalm 30)

My tears have been my food day and night...

Why is my soul so downcast, why do you moan with me? (psalm 42)

In my time of distress, I turn to You with my hand uplifted

My eyes flow all night without respite, I will not be comforted. (Psalm 77)

As we listen to these words we hear the voices of those who call out in need of help.

These are actually words adapted from our psalms but they describe so accurately human emotion, suffering, searching for God, and for Shalom. The yearning inherent in these words is for support and love from God or perhaps in our cases from the people we love or the medical professionals that can respond to our cries for help. Rabbi Samuel Stahl explains that, "the depression described here is devastating, it robs the individual of hope. It plunges a person into a long-term indescribable hell... The psalmist confesses that his tears are his food day and night, and crying often accompanies this kind of depression.

This complaint clearly illustrates to what horrible psychic depths this biblical writer has sunk.¹

The following is a real life story, told on the National Alliance on Mental Illness website by Clarence Jordan, a 15-year veteran of the Navy, who suffered from Major Depression. “With the clarity of hindsight, Jordan now says that he struggled for many years with mental illness when he was in active duty in the Navy. While the signs of a problem were there, and more than one person tried to point them out to Jordan, he completely denied the problem at the time. His mental illness ultimately led to his departure from the military, and for nearly a decade, it caused him to bounce from one job to another and from city to city. It wasn't until years later that Jordan finally had to face the fact he had a problem. At the time, he was using alcohol and other drugs to keep from dealing with the realities of life and that approach ultimately led to trouble with the law. A judge gave him the choice of going to jail or going into treatment. It was this push that led Clarence Jordan to start turning things around. He went to the local community mental health center in Nashville and met with several doctors who evaluated his condition. Ultimately Jordan was diagnosed with major depression.” Clarence Jordan teaches the following lesson, “It's important for people to realize that there are all different types and levels of mental illness and that the most important thing they can do if they think they have a problem is to step forward and talk to a mental health professional to find out. I personally had no base of experience or knowledge about mental illness that would have led me to believe I had a problem. Furthermore, my personal "image" of someone with a mental illness when I was in the military was definitely not me. We need to continue our efforts to make sure that people understand

¹ Refuat HaNefesh by Richard Address

that mental illnesses are real. And that they're treatable. I've seen countless people overcome mental illness, and through appropriate treatment and management of their conditions, they go on to lead positive, meaningful lives. I had a wonderful support network of family and friends who stood with me through my darkest hours and I will forever be grateful to them. I know it's not an easy journey, but it is journey that can be successful.”²

Clarence Jordan’s story reminds us that the way to build the sacred space for those who suffer mental illness is to help them get the proper medical treatment. But there is more, his last comment about the support network of family and friends who stood with him through his darkest hours can inspire us to create sacred space for the people we love.

In a URJ Press publication called *Refuat Hanefesh: Caring for the soul*, Rabbi Richard Address, former director of the department for Jewish Family Concerns explains that Mental illnesses are diseases of the brain; they are no fault diseases. The challenge is not one of blame or shame, but of how to cope with and adapt to living with mental illness. As long as family members seek to escape their suffering through denial, through frantic searches for magical cures, or through blame, they condemn themselves and usually the loved one who has a mental illness to additional misery. Acceptance is not easy.

Rabbi Address also explains that acceptance means the ability to face the reality of illness, to learn about it, to learn about treatment and to have compassion for the person who has the mental illness, and to have compassion and forgiveness toward those

²http://www.nami.org/Content/NavigationMenu/Mental_Illnesses/Depression/Clarence_Jordan_Person_First.htm

who do not understand. Acceptance means the courage to no longer be ashamed of the illness and the willingness to teach others that they might become more understanding and compassionate. Acceptance means getting on with one's own life and not allowing the illness to consume all the energies and resources of the family. It means attending to the needs of other family members who are not ill. Acceptance is building the sacred space for the person who suffers from the illness and the family members who face it with them.

Acceptance is one step to building this sacred space. The second step is understanding how we can act towards those who suffer from mental illnesses, during the oneg, a sheet can be found on each table that we can take home which will help us find strategies and actions we can take in response to certain symptoms. We hope that these guidelines will enable us to create a *mikdash*, a sacred space for those who lack wholeness and shalom. I would also like to mention that outside our sanctuary are booklets that teach us about mental illness as well as life's other challenges. These lessons are written by rabbis, spiritual care givers, and physicians as well.

We conclude with the following prayer adapted from the Sabbath prayerbook from the Jewish Reconstructionist foundation:

May God who blessed our fathers and mothers,
Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah
Grant blessed healing to all those members of our congregation
And members of our families who struggle with mental illness
And give them patience, hope and courage.
May God endow their attending physicians and therapists with insight and skill

That they be soon restored to health and vigor of body and mind.

May God be with their families too

And grant them patience, hope and courage.

May God remove their anger and wipe away their feelings of guilt.

May God endow them with a full life and with love

That they too enjoy health and vigor of body and mind.

May God bind up their wounds

That they may enjoy a simchah and thank God

For the blessings of health, and let us say Amen.