

Shabbat Mishpatim
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 Congregation Rodeph Sholom
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Out of the Chaos

Perhaps you read it in a book or saw it on the big screen – the tale of the Acutes and the Chronicles, ruled over by the frightening Big Nurse, or, as she is infamously known in pop culture, Nurse Ratched. As the story goes, Nurse Ratched subjects her patients to horrific treatments – not as curative measures but, rather, as punitive measures. But, then, in comes Patient McMurphy, a transfer from the Pendleton Work Form. McMurphy is different. There is a swagger about McMurphy. He sees through Nurse Ratched’s manipulation from the outset. And then the real chaos begins as the two confront each other. That chaos, though, leads to a ward-wide rebellion. There are protests, there is a power struggle and the tables seem to turn as McMurphy torments Nurse Ratched and the rest of the hospital staff. But then the tables turn again and the patients and McMurphy spiral into chaos as they realize Nurse Ratched holds the key to their freedom.

Chaos begetting chaos begetting chaos begetting chaos. On some level, this is the story we have been reading as we have ventured through the beginning of the Book of Exodus these last few Shabbatot. First, everything comes crashing down for the Israelite people under the enslavement of a tyrannical Pharaoh. Next, the youngest male children are threatened by an edict of death. Then, saved by Miriam and raised into a position of power, Moses, now leader of the Israelite people, is unsure what to do amidst the piling challenges. So he turns to his God and says, “Why have you done evil to this people?” But the burdens keep mounting. When God sends plagues to the Egyptians in an effort to turn things around, Pharaoh’s heart is only further hardened. And then the Israelites are trapped between Pharaoh’s army and the sea and freedom seems bleak. But the Israelites prevail and march to freedom. Is that good enough though? No. In the desert the people complain bitterly to Moses, so much so that Moses goes before God and silently prays for help – so silently that his prayer itself does not make it into the Torah text. We only know that Moses prays to God because God tells us so after the fact.

Moses is so beleaguered and overwhelmed by the responsibility put upon him – a responsibility he had not asked for, a responsibility he said he was not equipped to handle – that his prayers are silent. We can picture Moses in his darkness, without words left to say, but with fervent need for guidance, for a way out. It just all feels like too much.

“How am I going to manage?” Moses wonders. “Will I get through this?” Moses asks himself. “I can’t see the light at the end of the tunnel,” Moses thinks. “I just don’t want to go through this all again tomorrow,” Moses whispers.

Moses isn’t alone. There is a reason that we continue to read Moses’ story week after week, year after year. We read Moses’ story week after week, year after year because, for so many of us, it’s our own story.

It's the story of the middle aged man who becomes stressed at work but remains in denial about it until the point when it becomes so severe that he has panic attacks and loses his self-confidence. He masks his symptoms because he's a department manager and what will his employees think if he shows weakness? Even when he has a panic attack while chairing a meeting, struggling for air and trying to breathe, he doesn't tell anyone. He stays quiet.

It's the story of a 31 year old graduate student who buckles under the pressure of studying for exams. She stops eating, stops sleeping. Her grades plummet. She loses interest in everything. She spends a lot of time at home, but no one really notices because she'd always spent a lot of time in the library. She's too embarrassed to say anything – how can both be able to get herself into a Master's program but not be able to get herself off the couch?

The stories aren't just situational, though. They are stories of ongoing, lifelong, chronic struggles.

It's the story of a 62 year old woman whose first suicide attempt came at age 13. She says the idea first occurred to her at age 7. She cares too much she says. Her life will never be easy, she says. She cannot sleep at night; her nightmares wake her up. She is plagued by the thought that she has not done enough. She cannot pretend that life is good. She worries about the husband she fears she has exhausted. She worries about the children she fears she has alienated. She worries not about whether the thoughts of suicide will return but when.

It's the story of getting going to college and realizing that the lack of motivation isn't a lack of motivation at all but the beginning of a life-long struggle with depression.

It's the story of drug and alcohol addiction that in an attempt to self-medicate the pain that comes from untreated depression and anxiety.

21 million American adults struggle with depression. And these are just the people who have sought treatment. Over the course of their lifetime, over 16% of Americans will suffer major depressive episodes – whether they are able to identify the experience as depression or not.¹

And amongst these 21 million American adults are Jews. Jews in this congregation. The stories above are the stories of so many members in this congregation – of us personally, of our loved ones, of our family, of our friends. Of getting pushed beyond the limits of what we can cope with and into murky territory where life's challenges become too much to deal but we're too busy trying to deal with what we feel we have to do, to just keep swimming to ask for help. Or of struggling over the course of a lifetime to manage a condition that can sometimes feel as though it will never have resolution.

It is true. It doesn't get fixed in an instant and, sometimes, it doesn't resolve over the course of a lifetime. It involves taking a first step, trying something, falling, teetering, flailing, getting up, and trying again. In this week's Torah portion, responding to Moses' plea for relief in last week's parsha, God responds by taking over the reins of leadership for a moment and tending to

¹ Statistic from Rabbi Jeff Sirkman's sermon "Choosing LIFE—'Against Depression'" based on statistics from the National Institute of Mental Health.

the chaotic Israelites as God gives law. And it works for a while. But it does not work forever. Eventually they will make a Golden Calf and Moses will again feel overwhelmed. In a couple of weeks, Moses will ascend Mount Sinai and say to God, “Har’eini na et k’vodecha” – “O, let me behold Your Glory!” Does Moses really want simply to see God or is Moses, once again, making a desperate plea for God’s help, for God’s presence? Whether we experience depression or anxiety or depression ourselves or care for someone who does, we need to have people we can call on – a friend, a sibling, a teacher, a spouse. And there are people in the CRS community you can call on like your rabbis and your cantors.

When it cannot be a human being you call on, like Moses, sometimes, it can be God. It can be through words of prayer. This year on Shabbat Shuva, one of our own CRS congregants eloquently shared the transformational power of prayer in her own life as she struggled through depression. She said:

“There came a point in the summer of 2010 when it occurred to me that I hadn’t had any real feelings in a long time. There was no color in my world. There was a baseline sadness, but it didn’t express itself with any fervor; it was just how I was. I was gray at best, and black a lot of the time. Sitting in the rocking chair that had been my grandmother’s one afternoon, it occurred to me that I’d often cried during Mi Shebeirach and sometimes during Shalom Rav, when I’d been at services in the past. . . With great effort, I showered, put on a clean dress, and walked the mile or so from my house to this building. I prayed with you, and I was crying before we even began singing Mi Sheibeirach, when the rabbi asked us to think of those in need of healing of body, of mind, or of spirit, because I knew I was in desperate need of all three. As it turned out, crying *was* better than feeling nothing, and so I came back the next Friday night. It wasn’t until more than a year later, when I had a fever of 101, that I missed an erev Shabbat service, and over the last three years, I’ve missed no more than 10 or 15. . . . I am grateful for this space, for the community, and for these prayers, which have brought me back to life.”

Sometimes, as in this experience, help will find us in surprising places or from surprising people. And it is OK to say yes. When God offers Moses help, Moses says OK. Moses doesn’t try to wing it or do it all on his own. Last week Aaron and Hur, one on each side, supported Moses’ hands as they grew heavy, placing a stone beneath him as he sat. Moses did not try to fight Amalek himself, Moses did not try to find the internal weariness, the internal sense of helplessness and hopelessness he’d come to find himself in on his own. When others came to his rescue, he said OK. And it did not mean that he was broken. He’s the first person that comes to mind when we think of the Judeo-Christian religion. There are movies about him. He’s our mascot. He’s incredibly successful. And he still struggles. And he still asks for help. And he still accepts help.

Kesey’s famous novel was, of course, a critique of the mental health care of the early 20th century and the beginning of the movement towards deinstitutionalization. Thankfully, we have come leaps and bounds from the kind of medical treatment depicted in the novel and the film that followed. More than that, though, rather than quietly reading novels or watching movies at

home, we are beginning to live in a time when we can talk about these struggles out loud. But it can be so very difficult, so very overwhelming, so very alienating.

The Talmud tells the story of Rabbi Eleazar, a poor man who one day fell ill. Rabbi Yochanan went to visit him and found him lying alone in the dark. He saw that Rabbi Eleazar was weeping. "Why are you crying?" he asked the sick man...Rabbi Yochanan asked a series of questions and answers, trying to understand the root of Rabbi Eleazar's tears. Finally, Rabbi Eleazar answered, "I am weeping because all this beauty will one day decay in the earth." Rabbi Yochanan stopped asking questions and offering answers. He said, "then you have good reason to weep," and the two of them wept together. Yochanan said to Eleazar, "Give me your hand." He gave him his hand, and he raised him up.

Once Rabbi Yochanan himself fell ill and was visited by Rabbi Hanina. After speaking with him, Hanina held out his hand and Rabbi Yochanan stood up. The Talmud asks, "But why, if Rabbi Yochanan was such a great healer, couldn't he raise himself?" And the Talmud answers, "Because the prisoner cannot free himself from prison."²

Indeed, we need to extend a hand to one another. We need to be in conversation with one another. The Mental Health Initiative is hosting just such an evening on Wednesday, February 26th. There will be an opportunity to hear from 3 experts about just how complex and beautiful the mind can be and how to identify signs of depression and anxiety throughout the lifecycle. It is our hope that this will be part of a continued open and honest conversation about mental health – and, in particular, about depression and anxiety – within this congregation.

Our stories are stories of journey. They are not stories of quick fixes or stories with sad beginnings and happy endings, easily achieved. They are stories with winding paths. They are stories sometimes filled with silence, sometimes filled with confusion, sometimes filled with small steps on a long road. And that is what is real. That is what is Torah.

² Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 5b.