

Mental Health – Avot 4:1

מְכַל מְלַמְדֵי הַשְּׂפִלְתֵי כִּי עֲדוּתֵיךָ (תהלים קיט) בֶּן זֹמָא אוֹמֵר, אֵיזְהוּ חָכָם, הַלּוֹמֵד מִכָּל אָדָם, שְׁנֵאמַר
טוֹב אֶרְךָ אַפִּים מִגְבוּר וּמִשָּׁל בְּרוּחוֹ מְלִכָּד (משלי טז) שִׁיקָה לִי. אֵיזְהוּ גְבוּר, הַכּוֹבֵשׁ אֶת יָצְרוֹ, שְׁנֵאמַר
יִגִּיעַ כְּפִיךָ כִּי תֹאכַל אֲשֶׁרֶיךָ וְטוֹב לָךְ. אֲשֶׁרֶיךָ, (תהלים קכח) עִיר. אֵיזְהוּ עֲשִׂיר, הַשֹּׁמֵחַ בְּחֶלְקוֹ, שְׁנֵאמַר
כִּי מְכַבְּדֵי (שמואל א ב) בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה. וְטוֹב לָךְ, לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא. אֵיזְהוּ מְכַבֵּד, הַמְכַבֵּד אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת, שְׁנֵאמַר
אֲכַבֵּד וּבְנֵי יִקְלוּ

Ben Zoma said: Who is wise? He who learns from every man, as it is said: “From all who taught me have I gained understanding” ([Psalms 119:99](#)). Who is mighty? He who subdues his [evil] inclination, as it is said: “He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that rules his spirit than he that takes a city” ([Proverbs 16:3](#)). Who is rich? He who rejoices in his lot, as it is said: “You shall enjoy the fruit of your labors, you shall be happy and you shall prosper” ([Psalms 128:2](#)) “You shall be happy” in this world, “and you shall prosper” in the world to come. Who is he that is honored? He who honors his fellow human beings as it is said: “For I honor those that honor Me, but those who spurn Me shall be dishonored” ([I Samuel 2:30](#)).

A discussion on Mental Health based on Avot 4:1

Some Textual Questions to ask Chanichim:

- Why does Ben Zoma choose these 4 things in particular?
- Is there any qualities you would add?
- Do you think that these things are subjective?
- What lesson can we take from this Mishna?

Some General Questions to ask Chanichim:

- How do we deal with this clash of ideals between what society defines as wisdom, might, riches etc?
- Does our happiness rely on achieving these things?
- Do you think that a failure to achieve these things can affect us mentally?
- How do these things affect our self-esteem and self-worth?

Some Personal Questions to ask Chanichim:

- How would you define happiness?
- Who would you define as wise?
- Who do you feel has mastered Ben Zoma's idea of might?
- What is a way in which we can honour our fellow human beings?

Other sources and quotes to bring into discussion:

Rabbi Tatz – A Teenagers Guide to life

Rabbi Tatz talked about depression in his chapter on happiness. He explains that a central feature of depression is the feeling of hopelessness and despire, the feeling of no movement towards any goal, or the feeling of impossibility of reaching any goal. He explains that this is the cause of depression – absence of movement towards a godl. When the neshama feels that life is sliding by, and no meaningful progress is being made, that is when there is a sense of stagnation, or despair. The neshamawnat to grow and develop, and to be active and busy.

Devarim 4:15: וְנִשְׁמַרְתֶּם מְאֹד לְנַפְשֵׁיכֶם כִּי לֹא רִאִיתֶם כָּל־תְּמוּנָה בַּיּוֹם דִּבֶּר יְהוָה אֵלֵיכֶם בְּחַרְבַּב מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ: - For your own sake, therefore, be most careful—since you saw no shape when the LORD your God spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire—

Sanhedrin Daf 37A: וְכֹל הַמְקִיִּים נֶפֶשׁ אַחַת מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל מַעֲלָה עָלָיו הַכְּתוּב כֵּאִילוּ קִיִּים עוֹלָם מֵלֵא - **And** conversely, **anyone who sustains one soul from the Jewish people, the verse ascribes him credit as if he sustained an entire world.**

These two sources are about taking care of our physical bodies. Mental health is as important as physical.

A Related Story - “Jews Must Take Mental Illness Out of the Shadows.” By Stephen Fried

“What messages do we send to our congregations every day about mental illness and addiction? Do we, for example, believe in prayers for healing diseases of the brain the same way we do for all other diseases? Do we believe in mourning deaths from the tragic outcomes of these illnesses—suicides, overdoses—the same way we do for all other diseases? Do we regularly include these diseases in the “health” and “wellness” that we pray for and wish for others? Do our rabbis and community members offer hospital or home medical visits for these illnesses?”

If not, well, why not? There is ample evidence that these are diseases like all the others for which we offer our sincerest sympathies. The theories too many of us were taught as kids, that these illnesses are somehow caused by faulty parenting, or reflect weakness or failure, have been thoroughly debunked.

And if we do believe in this equality — which, I suspect, in theory we do — then why in practice do we so rarely talk about the day-to-day medical challenges of depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorder, schizophrenia and all the substance use disorders? Why do we still whisper about mental illness the way we used to whisper about cancer? I mean, it's more prevalent than cancer, with a much heavier disease burden (the measure of time lost to illness)

Yet today, if I said the name of a friend or family member with breast cancer during the Mi Shebeirach — the very public prayer for healing when the Torah is being read — and I was asked afterward what was wrong with him or her, I would have no problem telling the truth. If I wanted to pray for a friend or family member who was depressed or manic, or pray to support someone who had a slip in recovery, I might consider it a personal betrayal — or at least a HIPAA violation — to mention the person's name aloud.

The silence that pervades our synagogues is a proxy for the broader reluctance of patients and family members dealing with mental illness to seek comfort in life and openness in death.

Some Interactive Resources:

JAMI – Wellbeing resources for on campus

http://jamiuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Jami_MHFA_Leaflet_Web.pdf

Poetry- Poetry & Anxiety by @croptopassassin on Instagram

(<https://www.instagram.com/tv/BzwMZ7cAdCK/?igshid=dimz13m0pv61>)

Ted Talk – There's no shame in taking care of your mental health

(https://www.ted.com/talks/sangu_delle_there_s_no_shame_in_taking_care_of_your_mental_health?language=en)

Ted Talk – Stop the stigma: Why its Important to talk about mental health

(https://www.ted.com/talks/heather_sarkis_stop_the_stigma_why_it_s_important_to_talk_about_mental_health)