LIBRARY COPYRIGHT NOTICE

www.huc.edu/libraries

Regulated Warning

See Code of Federal Regulations, Title 37, Volume 1, Section 201.14:

The copyright law of the United States (title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material.

Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specific conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be “used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research.” If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of “fair use,” that user may be liable for copyright infringement.

This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law.

קראתי יה

Karati Yah: Wisdom About Mental Health
from Jewish Texts and Teachers

Jenna Leigh Mark

Senior Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Cantorial Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music
New York, New York

March 3, 2022
Thesis Advisor: Rabbi Kim S. Geringer

This thesis is written for everyone who has ever felt in need of healing of mind and spirit.
This is not the beginning of the conversation, nor is it the end.
May we continue to open our hearts and minds to conversations about mental health,
recognizing that our communication makes others feel supported and loved.
That very support could be the key to lifting someone's spirit and saving a life.

In the words of Debbie Friedman, *z"l*:
"Help us find the courage to make our lives a blessing."

May we always remember that we are a blessing in all moments of life,
no matter how beautifully broken we may feel.

Table of Contents

Introduction

My cantorial calling came at the peak of a mental health crisis. At that point, struggling with depression[1] and anorexia[2] had been part of my life for over a decade. While I had been surviving and presenting as though I was thriving each day, the reality was that I was on the brink of a relapse. Over the five or so years prior, I had relapsed a handful of times. I dealt with each step backward in the best way I could so as not to frighten friends or family but to still call upon them for help, for I knew that I could not get healthier alone. Yet, I handled that last relapse in a significantly different way than the rest.

I had long felt the need for a creative and Jewish outlet to keep myself afloat. I had recently begun teaching myself to play the guitar, and I would occasionally pull out my worn and tattered *Shireinu*,[3] which my parents bought me as a gift in high school. The initial moments of simply holding a book filled with the music of my childhood brought a sense of calm and steadiness that would only grow as I slowly made my way through playing the songs on the pages. In those moments, I was not only swamped by the memories of singing those prayers with friends and family, I also felt supported by the long line of people who had sung those melodies and texts before me. These pieces of

---

[1] Depression – "Depression is more than just sadness. People with depression may experience a lack of interest and pleasure in daily activities, significant weight loss or gain, insomnia or excessive sleeping, lack of energy, inability to concentrate, feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt and recurrent thoughts of death or suicide. Depression is the most common mental disorder." – apa.org, *American Psychiatric Association*, adapted from the *Encyclopedia of Psychology.*

[2] Anorexia – "Anorexia nervosa is an eating disorder characterized by weight loss (or lack of appropriate weight gain in growing children); difficulties maintaining an appropriate body weight for height, age, and stature; and, in many individuals distorted body image." – adapted from the National Eating Disorder Association. *Nationaleatingdisorders.org*, 2018.

[3] Eglash, Joel N. *The Complete Shireinu*. Transcontinental Music Publications, 2002.

music connected me to the Jewish people and helped me to find not only the strength within to battle another challenging moment, but also the clarity to recognize my purpose. This music saved me in a time of despair and mental illness. By choosing music in my time of need, I chose life. Encouraging others to do the same has since become essential to the person I am and to the cantorate I hope to live.

On the holiest day of the Jewish year, we read the words from Deuteronomy, "*Uvacharta bachayim"* – "Choose life."[4] In our daily liturgy we recite the words of *Yishtabach*,[5] with the words "*Habocheir b'shirei zimrah"* – "Blessed is the one who chooses musical songs of praise."[6] Although the tenses of these Hebrew phrases do not align, this misalignment supports the importance of music in healing. "*Habocheir b'shirei zimrah"* speaks of God as the One Who chooses music. With this, God exemplifies the significance of music in our daily lives – that song and praise is of utmost importance to God most high. The words "*Uvacharta bachayim"* are a commandment from God to the people preaching the importance of life. Choosing to continue living, or choosing to live with hope and positivity, is not always an easy task. In order for us to move forward, we look to those we love and trust for guidance. We even ask, "What are those aspects that keep our loved ones moving forward?" Consequently, as we look towards God for guidance about how to choose life, we are reminded that God chose music as a means of moving forward each day. In order to reach holiness, we must make

---

[4] Deuteronomy 30:19, trans. *JPS*

[5] A prayer in the *Psukei D'zimra* section of the morning liturgy.

[6] "The only who chooses musical songs of praise." – *Sefaria.* Translation based on the Metsudah linear siddur, by Avrohom Davis 1981

.

these choices daily practices. Doing so, the one who chooses musical songs of praise is also the one who chooses life.

Mental illness and mental health are very personal and private parts of an individual's life. There is shame and fear that comes from feeling "broken" or "less than" what we often think we should be. We live in a world filled with people who endure mental health traumas every day, and yet only now, with the help of social media, are people beginning to speak more openly about their experiences. While I do not propose broadcasting one's life to everyone, I do believe in the power of shared experiences. I believe that normalizing mental illness is one of the best ways to make a positive difference in someone else's recovery. I would even claim that clergy have a responsibility to use their experiences to help those who are going through similar circumstances.

As I was figuring out my own way through recovery, I often thought about the words of Rabbi Hillel[7] (*Pirkei Avot* 1:14), *"Im ein ani li, mi li? Uchshe'ani l'atzmi? V'im lo achshav eimatai?"*[8] My recovery was something that only I could achieve. I knew that others could only wish me health and comfort, but that I would need to be the one to actually create my own change. If not now, when? These questions cracked me open and stayed with me every moment. Knowing very little about musical composition, I would often sit with my guitar and play around with how the words of Hillel fit with my simplistic knowledge of guitar chords. These moments inspired a deeply personal, albeit novice-like, composition. While this piece of music is something that I will most likely

[7] Rabbi Hillel – Also known as Hillel the Elder, Hillel was a Jewish sage associated with the development of the Mishnah and the Talmud.

[8] *Pirkei Avot* 1:14 – "If I am not for myself, who is for me? But if I am for my own self [only], what am I? And if not now, when?" – *Sefaria.* Dr. Joshua Kulp.

keep to myself, it reinforced my love of Jewish text and helped bring me the *koach*[9] to persevere. I continue to be in awe of musicians, specifically Jewish songwriters and clergy, who are vulnerable enough to use their personal experiences to create music for their own healing and the healing of their communities.

This thesis looks at how mental health and mental illness have played a role in Jewish texts, thought, and practice through history. Five biblical figures were chosen to analyze in the context of mental health, as well as five psalms and five musical settings of liturgical texts. Particularly meaningful to me is the analysis of my interviews with clergy. I spoke with eleven clergy people - cantors and rabbis - who have had experiences with mental health and mental illness. They spoke about their mental health journeys and how music, prayer, and sometimes songwriting, were a part of their healing and recovery process. These clergy people are brave and inspiring human beings who are helping the Jewish people to become more open and aware of the mental health traumas that plague so many lives. The more we speak about how mental health has impacted our own lives, the more we help erase the hurtful stigma that is felt by living with mental illness.

[9] *Koach* – Hebrew for "strength."

Rabbinic Understandings of Mental Health

Mental health figures in many Jewish texts as far back as the Torah. In these texts, depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues are not defined in the same way as they are now in 2022, of course. However, the underlying emotional states were described in ways similar to current mental health characterizations. Moses Maimonides (1138-1204) understood this: "Physical health is a prerequisite for spiritual health, but a healthy body does not in itself produce a healthy spirit."[10] Maimonides clearly reflected the Jewish understanding that the health of the spirit is paramount, and he believed that the shofar sounded on the Jewish New Year calls out, "Awake, O sleeper, from your sleep; O slumberers, arouse yourselves from your slumbers…"[11] According to Maimonides, "…a person can sleep-walk through life."[12] The blowing of the shofar is one way to change the routine and perspective that may have caused one to walk through life in a state of melancholy. Jews are constantly reminded to act and to care for their own mental health so that one can "Take care of yourself and treat your soul diligently."[13] Taking care of the body and soul is one of Judaism's most important *mitzvot*.[14] *Pikuach Nefesh,*[15] the mitzvah of saving a life, teaches that saving someone's life takes priority over virtually all other commandments. This "life" extends to the soul of a person, not only the physical body that the person inhabits. Similarly, on Yom Kippur it is read, "I

---

[10] *Hilkhot Deot* 4:1. *Sefaria.*

[11] Maimonides, *Hilchot Teshuvah* 3:4. *Sefaria.*

[12] "Week 1 Video Teaching Transcript." *Institute for Jewish Spirituality*, https://www.jewishspirituality.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Week-1-Video-Transcript-Questions.pdf.

[13] Deuteronomy 4:9 - רַק הִשָּׁמֶר לְךָ וּשְׁמֹר נַפְשְׁךָ מְאֹד, trans. *JPS*

[14] *Mitzvot* – The 613 Commandments written in the Torah.

[15] *Pikuach Nefesh* – The mitzvah of saving a life, from Leviticus 18:5: "You shall therefore keep my statutes…which is a man do, he shall live by them." *BT, Yoma* 85b adds: "That he shall live by them, and not that he shall die by them."

call heaven and earth to witness against you this day. I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life so that you and your offspring will live."[16] This text from Deuteronomy is a reminder of the emphasis that Judaism puts upon the importance of continuing to live life – not sleep-walking through life, but truly enjoying the happy dimensions of the soul.

Depression, Anxiety & Loneliness

According to the *Handbook of Psychotherapy and Jewish Ethics*,[17] there are many Hebrew terms used in the Bible to describe mental illness. *"Marah shechorah"* means "black bile" and is understood to refer to melancholy, or what is known as depression today. *"Teiruf daat"* is a "tearing of one's mental state," which "indicates a temporary state of mental distress that could render one *'shoteh,'* or a threat to one's health and safety."[18] King Solomon[19] recommended, "If there is anxiety (*"yashchena"*[20]) in a man's mind let him quash it and turn it into joy with a good word" (*davar*[21]*).*[22] This verse from Proverbs is cited in the Babylonian Talmud three times ,[23] one of which describes a disagreement between Rav Ammi and Rav Assi. One rabbi states, "You should force it out of your mind," and the other says, "You should talk with others about it." This

---

[16] Deuteronomy 30:19-20 – *Sefaria.*
הַעִדֹתִי בָכֶם הַיּוֹם אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַחַיִּים וְהַמָּוֶת נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה וּבָחַרְתָּ בַּחַיִּים לְמַעַן תִּחְיֶה אַתָּה וְזַרְעֶךָ׃

[17] Spero, Moshe HaLevi. *Handbook of Psychotherapy and Jewish Ethics*. Feldheim Pub, 1986.
[18] Ibid.
[19] King Solomon – 990-931. Succeeded his father, David, in reigning over Israel. Attributed with building the First Temple in Jerusalem.
[20] *Yashchena* – Hebrew word used for "anxiety." Technically translates to "to bow down" or "to depress."
[21] *Davar* – Hebrew word for "word."
[22] Proverbs 12:25 - דְּאָגָה בְּלֵב־אִישׁ יַשְׁחֶנָּה וְדָבָר טוֹב יְשַׂמְּחֶנָּה. *Sefaria.* Jewish Publication Society.
[23] *Yuma, 75a; Sotah, 42b; Sanhedrin*, 100a. *Sefaria.* Koren-Steinsaltz.

demonstrates that from the time of the Talmud, if not before, there have been debates amongst Jewish thinkers about how best to deal with mental health and its treatment. Seymour Hoffman argues that these two rabbis "…are actually in agreement that psychotherapy is important to alleviate anxiety and stress."[24] He explains the use of the Hebrew word *"davar." "Davar"* can mean both a "thing," such as a cognitive or behavioral therapy, or *"davar,"* coming from the root "ד–ו–ר" can mean "talking," or a way in which a person can discuss their problems with talk therapy. With this analysis, Hoffman believes that both Rav Ammi and Rav Assi felt that when one encounters stressors and anxieties, one should speak about them and care for themselves in ways that would enhance their wellbeing. The importance of speaking with someone regarding mental health is reflected in Genesis 2:18 when God tries to find a companion for Adam and tells Adam that, "It is not good for man to be *l'vado* ("alone")."[25] Not only must one do all one can to erase pangs of inner loneliness and depression, but if one does feel such emotions, then one must surround themselves with others so that they are not alone in a time of emotional distress. The extreme aloneness that comes from emotional distress deep in the soul is *"kareit,"* meaning to be "cut off," in this case, from one's own self. *"Kareit"* and *"l'vado"* work in tandem, as one can easily isolate oneself from others if one is feeling detached from oneself, and vice versa. Interestingly, Rabbi Richard Address understands these two words of loneliness as a search for meaning similar to the call, "*Ayekah?* Where are you?*"*[26] Address posits that "God is constantly asking us where

---

[24] *Mental Health, Psychotherapy and Judaism*. Seymour Hoffman, Ph. D. 2011

[25] Genesis 2:18 - לֹא־טוֹב הֱיוֹת הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ אֶעֱשֶׂה־לּוֹ עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ:, trans. *JPS*

[26] Genesis 3:9 - וַיִּקְרָא יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶל־הָאָדָם וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אַיֶּכָּה, trans. *JPS*

we are. Why was I born? Why must I die? Why – for what purpose – am I alive?"[27] The question, "Where are you?" as Address understands it, is most often a question of emotion, similar to, "What are you feeling?" or "How are you doing?" These questions can lead to challenging internalizations resulting in feeling alone, physically or emotionally. Yet the purpose of life is not to be alone, and so people are charged with the challenge to do what they can in order to keep their souls from feeling the intensity of *"kareit."*

Depression and mental illness do not only appear in Jewish texts as an experience of aloneness. King David,[28] while trying to escape Akhish, King of Gat, feigns madness by using the words *"yitholeil,"* which comes from the root *"ה–ל–ל"* meaning "to cry aloud; praise."[29] This associates "…madness with ecstatic behavior of a religious kind,"[30] with something that King David would often do. Likewise, Rabbi Nachman[31] (1772-1810) said, "I will tell you how, out of depression, people were able to rejoice."[32] Like King David, Rabbi Nachman believed that even a person stricken with depression could experience joy. These two are among the most emotionally conflicted and depressed Jewish figures in history. However, both continued to argue that there was always a reason to live for the next day. In his biography of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav,

---

[27] Address, Rabbi Richard. "Tradition, Texts, and Our Search for Meaning." *Judaism and Health: A Handbook of Practical, Professional and Scholarly Resources*, edited by Jeff Levin and Michele F. Prince, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013, pp. 157–168.

[28] King David – 1040-970. His story is chronicled in the two Books of Samuel. Ruled over Israel. Defeated Goliath, became Husband to Batsheva, is thought to have authored the 150 psalms.

[29] 1 Samuel 21:14 – וַיִּתְהֹלֵל, trans. *JPS*

[30] *Caring for the Soul: R'fuat HaNefesh - A Mental Health Resource and Study Guide*. Edited by Rabbi Richard F. Address, UAHC Press, 2003.

[31] Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav – 1772-1810. The great-grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov, leader of Jewish Hasidism, whose theology was to be as close to God as possible.

[32] *Chokhmah U'tevunah* 15:1. *Sefaria.*

Tormented Master, Rabbi Arthur Green said of Rabbi Nachman, "No act of service of God came easily to him; everything came only as a result of great and oft-repeated struggle… He could fall several times and have to begin all over again."[33] He was a man of great depression, as well as great determination to rise up out of that depression. Rabbi Nachman taught:

> "Think only about today. Think only about the present day and the present moment. When someone wants to start serving God, it seems too much of a burden to bear. But if you remember that you only have today, it won't be such a burden. Don't put off the service of God from one day to the next, saying, 'I'll start tomorrow – tomorrow I'll pray with proper concentration.' All a person has is the present day and the present moment. Tomorrow is a whole different world."[34]

Rabbi Nachman believed that one should live for the present moment and do as much as one could do to make the present as beneficial and positive as possible, knowing that there, most likely, will be a tomorrow in which no one knows what will happen. This belief of Rabbi Nachman's is similar to Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski's[35] belief that Judaism requires wholeness. Twerski taught that this wholeness is evident when God said to Abraham, "I am God [*El Shaddai*]. Walk before me and **be complete**."[36] In order to feel a sense of wholeness, while in illness and pain, one must still look to God as a partner and create a positive environment. The Mishnah teaches, "Do not look at the flask, but at

---

[33] *Caring for the Soul: R'fuat Hanefesh: A Mental Health Resource and Study Guide.* Rabbi Richard Address. (8). "Tormented Master." Rabbi Arthur Green.

[34] Likutey Moharan 1 (272). Moshe Mykoff, Breslow Research Inst., 1986-2012. *Sefaria.*

[35] Abraham J. Twerski – 1930-2021. An Orthodox rabbi and psychiatrist who blended the 12-step program and Judaism to come up with other approaches for addiction.

[36] Genesis 17:1. Twerski, Rabbi Abraham J. "Judaism and Addiction." *Judaism and Health: A Handbook of Practical, Professional and Scholarly Resources*, edited by Jeff Levin and Michele F. Prince, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013, pp. 239–250.

what it contains."[37] Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at American Jewish University said of this Mishnaic teaching, "In teaching ourselves to see the inner sparks that light a person's soul, rather than merely glancing at the casing that holds those precious assets of personality, aspiration, and caring, we can act like God in the wilderness, healing when we can, and transcending limits when we cannot."[38] Therefore, we cannot only look to God or to others when we feel incomplete. Perhaps the most important place to look is to ourselves. Franz Rosenzweig taught, "Much that is sick in us can be made healthy… Our job is not to understand the three elements but to choose life with conviction, and we can do so because we, as created beings, bear the gift and demand of revelation, and rightly hope and pray for redemption."[39] We have the power to change our mental and emotional state, but we must do so with help from others, from God, and from ourselves.

Healing Rabbis & Wounded Healers

Beginning as early as the second century there were rabbis who were also physicians and cuppers.[40] However, "healing rabbis" did not come about until later with the *aggadot*[41] of Rabbi Johanan. Rabbi Simkha Y. Weintraub writes of the *Aggadah:* "Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba fell ill, and Rabbi Johanan went in to visit him. He [Rabbi

---

[37] Rabbi Meir; *Pirkei Avot* 4:20. *Sefaria.*

[38] Landsberg, Rabbi Lynne F., and Shelly Thomas Christensen. "Judaism and Disability: R'fuat Hanefesh - the Healing of Our Souls, Individual and Communal." *Judaism and Health: A Handbook of Practical, Professional and Scholarly Resources*, edited by Jeff Levin and Michele F. Prince, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013, pp. 174–189.

[39] Rosenzweig, Franz. *The Star of Redemption*. Notre Dame, In., Notre Dame Press, 2014.

[40] Cuppers – People who employ the ancient from of cupping therapy (using suction from cups against the skin to help with pain, blood flow, and inflammation).

[41] *Aggadot* – Hebrew for "legends," or "parables." *Aggadot* appear in rabbinic literature, such as the *Talmud* and *Midrash*.

Johanan] said to him, 'Are your sufferings welcome/beloved to you?' He replied, 'Neither they nor their reward.' He said to him, 'Give me your hand.' He gave him his hand and he [Rabbi Johanan] raised [healed] him."[42] Rabbi Johanan became one of the leading "healers" in the Talmud, and his stories helped to set some of the structures for what would become the Jewish Healing Movement.[43] Weintraub taught that the "wounded healer" – a rabbi as a spiritual care provider – "when they pray for those who are suffering, must assume the stance of the *eved lifnei haMelekh,* the servant before the King, rather than the *sar lifnei haMelekh*, the nobleman before the King."[44] This is to say that the rabbi, or the wounded healer, must approach their service humbly instead of with a sense of entitlement. With this humility, the wounded healer would recognize their powerful act of holy service, as well as the fact that given any other circumstance their positions could have been reversed and they could be the person in need of healing.

Healing rabbis and wounded healers have a variety of ways in which they work. The story goes that in Warsaw in 1877, Rabbi Joseph Dov Soleveitchik fell into a deep depression. He ate minimal food, would not see students or colleagues, nor would he go to the synagogue or teach. "A specialist who was called in to treat him recommended total rest but added that if by chance the rabbi's spirit could be suddenly stimulated, healing would take place in a matter of minutes."[45] This assertion was made because of

---

[42] Weintraub, Rabbi Simkha Y. "At the Bedside in the Babylonian Talmud: Reflections on Classical Rabbinic Healers and Their Approaches to Helping the Suffering." *Judaism and Health: A Handbook of Practical, Professional and Scholarly Resources*, edited by Jeff Levin and Michele F. Prince, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013, pp. 9.

[43] Jewish Healing Movement – Begun by five women in the early 1990s as a way to help people deal with suffering, illness, and loss through Jewish wisdom.

[44] Ibid 18

[45] Hoffman, Seymour. *Mental Health, Psychotherapy and Judaism*. Mondial, 2011.

the power of the Rabbi's usual spirit on days when he was not suffering severe depression. Because Rabbi Soloveitchik was such a renowned and prolific scholar, it was thought that his healing could be quicker and more powerful than one who did not have his status. Perhaps this reasoning could be justified due to the onset of Soloveitchik's distress. His beloved mentor, Rabbi Joshua Leib Diskin, had just been incarcerated due to "…false charges by anti-Semitic authorities."[46] perhaps it was assumed that Rabbi Soloveitchik could will himself to stimulate his spirit so that he could take action and set his mentor free. This form of healing is dependent upon one's own mind and spirit.

Rabbi Ezkiel Landau, an 18th century rabbinic scholar, got caught up in another, yet common, concept of healing in the form of amulets. As told by Seymour Hoffman:

> "Rabbi Ezkiel Landau did not believe in amulets or in other supernatural remedies. Once he was consulted regarding an amulet. A distinguished woman was seized by a spirit of insanity. She felt that her condition was critical, and that she could be remedied only with an amulet prepared by Rabbi Ezkiel. Rabbi Ezkiel took a blank piece of parchment, wrapped it in a small pouch, sealed it with his personal signet, and said: 'This amulet should be worn around the neck of the woman for thirty days. After thirty days, open the amulet. If the writing disappears and the parchment is blank, it is a sign that the woman is remedied. And so they did. After thirty days the opened the amulet and found the parchment blank with no sign of script. The woman entirely recuperated from her illness."[47]

This form of healing is known now as the placebo effect,[48] in which someone is under the assumption that they are getting medical treatment, when really, they are only being made to think they are being given the treatment they desired. This story demonstrates that there are times when one may begin to feel more whole simply because someone else

---

[46] ibid

[47] ibid

[48] Placebo effect – A beneficial effect that comes from a harmless treatment, causing the patient to believe that the treatment was legitimately medicinal.

cared about them. Often, the act of listening to someone who is in a state of depression can do much to revive that person's spirit.

Thinkers from different denominations within Judaism have varying ideas about who is allowed to listen to and advise about someone's mental health. *Igrot Moshe, Yoreh De'ah* 2:57[49] says that, "It is forbidden to go to a psychologist or a psychiatrist who is a heretic or atheist…one must seek out a psychologist or a psychiatrist who keeps the Torah."[50] Similarly, *Tshuvot VeHanhagot* 1:465[51] says, "Even the best therapists have nothing to offer those whose sins have brought them to depression or sadness, for the help they need is from those knowledgeable in Torah, who are the real healers of souls."[52] Rabbi Yehoshua Neuwirth, an eminent Orthodox Rabbi, said at a conference in 2004 that, "It is prohibited to refer patients to psychiatrists. Psychiatrists stupefy the soul."[53] On the more progressive end of the Jewish spectrum, however, the priest and the physician have been inseparable. "The advent of scientific medicine in the middle of the 19th century threatened to separate medicine from religion. Nevertheless, many contemporary Jewish physicians consider their vocation to be spiritually endowed and not merely an ordinary profession."[54] For these Jewish healers, the link to their religion makes their profession more meaningful for both themselves and for their Jewish patients.

---

[49] *Igrot Moshe, Yoreh De'ah.* Responsa of Rav Moshe Feinstein. *Sefaria.*
[50] Hoffman, Seymour. *Mental Health, Psychotherapy and Judaism*. Mondial, 2011.
[51] *Tshuvot VeHanhagot,* 1:465. Understandings of Halacha by Rabbi Moses Sternburch. *Sefaria.*
[52] Hoffman, Seymour. *Mental Health, Psychotherapy and Judaism*. Mondial, 2011. p. 55.
[53] Ibid (56)
[54] Levin, Jeff, and Michele F. Prince. "Introduction: Judaism and Health." *Judaism and Health: A Handbook of Practical, Professional and Scholarly Resources*, edited by Jeff Levin and Michele F. Prince, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013, pp. xix–xxviii.

The Guilt of Mental Health

To become complete, as Genesis 17:1 teaches that human beings should, Rabbi Rachel Adler believes that we are only completely human if we are "…present to the suffering of other people"[55] – to hear, to listen, to advise, to be with someone in deep pain. Often when someone is feeling this depression or anxiety, they may feel that the suffering was deserved, or, as Adler says, "You are the guilty and were punished."[56] This is the answer that sufferers give to themselves to make sense of the suffering they must endure, even if it does not really make sense. There are various understandings of why someone suffers, particularly from the sufferer's standpoint. The simplest understanding is, as Adler suggests, that one did something bad and so were punished. "The Talmud says, 'A person's *yetzer hara*[57] renews itself every day and seeks to destroy him, and if it were not that God helps him, one could not resist it."[58] This *yetzer hara* serves as a power greater than oneself that cannot be defeated without the love and comfort of God. Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski likens the *yetzer hara* to addiction and compares 12 step programs[59] to the seeking of God in order not to be destroyed by the *yetzer hara*. It takes great strength to admit that one has both a problem, and the need for a power greater than

---

[55] Adler, Rabbi Rachel. "Bad Things Happen: On Suffering." *Judaism and Health: A Handbook of Practical, Professional and Scholarly Resources*, edited by Jeff Levin and Michele F. Prince, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013, pp. 173.

[56] Ibid 171.

[57] *Yetzer Hara* – Hebrew used for "evil impulse."

[58] Twerski, Rabbi Abraham J. "Judaism and Addiction." *Judaism and Health: A Handbook of Practical, Professional and Scholarly Resources*, edited by Jeff Levin and Michele F. Prince, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013, pp. 240.

[59] 12-Step-Program – A program with 12 steps and guiding principles, which set up a course of action for addiction recovery.

oneself. Often it is not until one can fully admit the suffering one is going through that one is able to enter into a phase of healing.

Rabbi Nancy Flam, co-founder of the Jewish Healing Center, looks at illness and disease through the *"din"* (judgment) of God. Flam understands *din* not as the harsh judgment of God, but rather the "amoral imposition of limits… Limits have no relationship to morality. Illness and disease emerge within the limits of the physical world, and they can thereby be understood as coming directly from God as the creator of the physical world with its laws and limits."[60] Therefore, disease and illness have no relationship to morality, since they only exist within the limits of the physical world. This theory may be helpful to the person who believes that they are suffering because of something that they made happen. According to Flam, bad things happen to good people for no moral reason. While Flam, and other rabbinic authorities, including philosopher Moses ben Jacob Cordovero,[61] believe that suffering is not based upon moral standing, others believe that the pursuit of *tikkun olam*[62] will help to affirm a life of little to no suffering. This is linked to "Choose life!" from Deuteronomy 30:19, and "related to this is the urge to help create hope out of despair."[63] The Jewish people are "*asirei hatikvah"*[64] ("prisoners of hope") and are always supposed to strive for hope no matter the challenging situation they find themselves in. Thus, if *tikkun olam* helps others and

---

[60] Olitzky, Kerry M. *Jewish Paths toward Healing and Wholeness: A Personal Guide to Dealing with Suffering*. Woodstock, Vt., Jewish Lights Pub, 2000. p. 16.

[61] Moses ben Jacob Cordovero – Also known as the Ramak. A 16th-century leader of *Kabbalah*.

[62] *Tikkun Olam* – Acts of kindness that are performed to repair the world.

[63] Feldman, Elizabeth. "Spiritual Resources for Jewish Healthcare Professionals." *Judaism and Health: A Handbook of Practical, Professional and Scholarly Resources*, edited by Jeff Levin and Michele F. Prince, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013, pp. 54–68.

[64] Zecharia 9:12 – "Return to Bizzaron, You prisoners of hope." - שׁוּבוּ לְבִצָּרוֹן אֲסִירֵי הַתִּקְוָה, trans. *JPS.*

brings hope to the sufferer, then the acts of *tikkun olam* do not do any harm to the sufferer other than to give them a false sense of reality. However, Arthur Green teaches that healing is mainly about being empathetic towards oneself and being present in the necessary healing. "Teaching that speech of a deep, mystical faith, where the gulf between the divine and human is transcended, is an important part of the healing resources our tradition has to offer."[65]

Music & Prayer

Music and prayer are undoubtedly linked to physical and emotional healing. As noted in Rabbi Nachman's, *The Seven Beggars,*[66] "Human life depends on the pulse. The ten pulse types parallel the ten types of song. Therefore, healing requires knowing the pulses of life and then knowing what song to use as a remedy."[67] However, not knowing what song to use does not need to hurt the sufferer because as Rabbi Lynne F. Landsberg clarified, "God does not discriminate by healing those patients who garner the most prayers. Rather, prayer strengthens those who pray, thereby enabling them to reach out and offer help."[68] This last notion, that prayer strengthens those who pray so that they may help others, reflects the call to Jews to continuously view themselves as though they went forth from Egypt so that they can identify with the suffering of others. Just as it is

---

[65] "Mystical Sources of the Healing Movement." *Healing and the Jewish Imagination: Spiritual and Practical Perspectives on Judaism and Health.* Arthur Green.
[66] Nachman, Rabbi, and Aryeh Kaplan. *Rabbi Nachman's Stories: The Stories of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (Sippurey Ma'asioth)*. Brooklyn, N.Y., Breslov Research Institute, 1983.
[67] *Likutey Hlakhoth, P'ru U'R'vu* 3:1. *Sefaria.*
[68] Landsberg, Rabbi Lynne F., and Shelly Thomas Christensen. "Judaism and Disability: R'fuat Hanefesh - the Healing of Our Souls, Individual and Communal." *Judaism and Health: A Handbook of Practical, Professional and Scholarly Resources*, edited by Jeff Levin and Michele F. Prince, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013, pp. 179.

their obligation to remember the Exodus from Egypt, it is also their obligation to pray to be able to help those who are suffering. To paraphrase Debbie Friedman, "We pray because we have the power to demonstrate that life is a blessing."[69]

Jewish understandings of mental health have been a part of the teachings of the Jewish people since Shmuel, a second century Babylonian *amora*[70] was first referenced as both a rabbi and a physician. In the present day, Rabbi Harold Kushner reminds us that when we feel lost or in need of healing:

> "We don't need to beg or bribe God to give us strength or hope or patience. We need only turn to the One, admit that we can't do this on our own, and understand that bravely bearing up under long term illness is one of the most human, and one of the most godly, things we can ever do. One of the things that constantly reassures me that God is real, and not just an idea that religious leaders make up, is the fact that people who for strength, hope and courage so often find resources of strength, hope and courage that they did not have before they prayed."[71]

---

[69] Debbie Friedman

[70] *Amora* – A group of rabbis from around 250-500 whose discussion of the Mishnaic law is recorded in the Talmud.

[71] Olitzky, Kerry M. *Jewish Paths toward Healing and Wholeness: A Personal Guide to Dealing with Suffering*. Woodstock, Vt., Jewish Lights Pub, 2000. p. 11.

Analysis of Mental Health in the Five Biblical Figures

This chapter will explore the intersection of mental health and the stories of five biblical characters: Rachel, Joseph, Hannah, Job, and King David. This chapter will also analyze the text of five Psalms and demonstrate how they might be used as a means of healing from mental illness. The psalms analyzed are Psalms 16, 23, 27, 118, and 121.

Rachel

Rachel was one of the four original matriarchs and the second wife of Jacob. While she is the fourth matriarch chronologically, in Reform and other settings, Rachel is often referenced third due to Jacob's intention to marry Rachel instead of Leah. Rachel's narrative primarily serves the story of Jacob and the birth of his children as ancestors of the Jewish people. Rachel was the second daughter of Laban and the intended wife of Jacob. However, Laban and Leah (Laban's first daughter) tricked Jacob into marrying Leah and working for Laban an extra seven years to later marry Rachel. When once she had hope of marrying the man she loved, Rachel was denied the future she wanted, betrayed by her family, and forced to continue with life feeling unfulfilled.

Along with this betrayal of family, once Jacob and Rachel were married, Rachel's body would betray her and cause her to be infertile for most of her short life. As biblical scholar Tikvah Frymer-Kensky notes, "The infertility of the matriarchs has two effects: it heightens the drama of the birth for the eventual son…and it emphasizes that pregnancy is an act of God."[72] Eventually Rachel gave birth to a son, Joseph, and later conceived another child, Benjamin, whose birth would kill her. Both births of Rachel's sons were

[72] Frymer-Kensky, Tikva. "Rachel: Bible." *Jewish Women's Archive*, 20 Mar. 2009. *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/rachel-bible.

significant in that Joseph grew to be Jacob's favorite son and the Vizier of Egypt, and Benjamin was the last child of Jacob's most beloved wife, as well as the only child to have been born in the land of Canaan. Yet, one cannot help but feel sorrow for Rachel, as she spent most of her life waiting for what was rightfully hers - waiting for Jacob to be allowed to marry her and waiting to bear children. Sadly, Rachel died the moment she bore her second child. Not only did she die, but Rachel was not allowed to be buried in the Cave of Machpelah like her ancestors. Jacob, in his attempt to explain his reasoning for burying Rachel on the road to Ephrath,[73] told Joseph that "…it was by Divine command"[74] that he bury Rachel on the road to Ephrath, for Rachel was prophesized to come out of her grave and weep for mercy for the children who would be exiled from Babylon.[75]

The prophet Jeremiah described Rachel's wailing: "A voice is heard on high, wailing, bitterly crying. Rachel weeps for her children. She refuses to be consoled, for they are gone."[76] The misery and desolation of Rachel is heard in Jeremiah's verses as he described specifically Rachel's heartache about losing her children. However, Nachmanides[77] believed that this misery went back to the beginning of Rachel's story when she sacrificed both her physical and her spiritual life for the sake of her sister. The Torah forbids the marrying of two sisters.[78] Nachmanides explains that since the *mitzvot* did not appear until after the time of the matriarchs and patriarchs, the laws were not necessary to be observed and Jacob was allowed to marry both Leah and Rachel.

---

[73] *Ephrath* – The former name of Bethlehem
[74] Genesis 48:7, trans. *JPS*
[75] Jeremiah 31:15 – "A cry is heard in Ramah – Wailing, bitter weeping – Rachel weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted for her children who are gone." Trans. *JPS.*
[76] Jeremiah 31:14, trans. *JPS.*
[77] Nachmanides – Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, known as the RaMBaN. 1194-1270
[78] Leviticus 18:6, trans. *JPS.*

Although Rachel knew that becoming Jacob's second wife would mean that she would never be able to return with Jacob to the land of his fathers, Rachel went through with Laban and Leah's plan, sacrificing her happiness for the sake of her sister. The Midrash[79] says that Rachel was rewarded because of her sacrifice and that God promised the return of her children to the Land of Israel. The Midrash claims that she argued with God saying:

> "Consider what I did for my sister Leah. All the work that Jacob did for my father was only so that he could marry me; however, when the time came for me to enter the nuptial canopy, they brought my sister instead. Not only did I keep my silence, but I gave her the secret password which Jacob and I had agreed on. You, too, if Your children have brought Your rival into Your house, keep Your silence."[80]

God recognized the sacrifices that Rachel had made on behalf of those she loved and thus permitted Israel to return. This extreme selflessness, while sometimes the mere nature of a person, can often be a sign that someone is experiencing intense depression and mental illness. Selflessness is noble, yet when one would give all they have of their happiness to make everyone around them happy, it calls attention to what one might think about their own self-worth. When someone feels that they deserve no happiness, then they often find themselves in emotional despair and a lack of understanding of their own value. Rachel recalls the dichotomy of selflessness – one can be selfless in a helpful way towards themselves and others, and one can be selfless in a way that destroys their own well-being.

[79] Genesis *Rabbah* 82:10, trans. *JPS*
[80] ibid

While it would be easy to look upon Rachel's life with pity, in his article "A Mother's Tears: Rachel Weeps for Her Children,"[81] Simon Jacobson offered a different opinion on how to think about the life of Rachel. Jacobson posits that, as found in the book of Tanya,[82] Rachel holds the attribute of *malchut* (dignity). This is why she died in childbirth and why her final resting place, *Kever Rachel*,[83] lay on a deserted roadside for centuries until Bethlehem expanded and Rachel's Tomb fell in its borders. In his article, Jacobson writes:

> "In psychological terms, *malchut* (Rachel) is dignity. Dignity is the feeling of confidence and security that comes from knowing that you have inherent value and are indispensable, by virtue of the fact that you were created in the divine image. The antithesis to dignity is a sense of worthlessness, shame, insecurity, low self-esteem, sometimes to the point of self-loathing."[84]

By Jacobson's definition of "dignity" and by the role this virtue played in Rachel's life, one could view Rachel as the bearer of optimism needed in recovery from mental illness. During weekday and Shabbat morning services, it is chanted, *"Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, she-asni b'tzelem Elohim,"*[85] ("Praise to You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, who made me in the image of God"). This reverence for being created in the "image of God" can elevate the worshiper, helping them to recognize the value of their lives. It is key for someone in recovery to believe that they can find virtue in their life and to live for their own sake. Living because one feels God created

---

[81] Jacobson, Simon. "A Mother's Tears - Rachel Weeps for Her Children." *The Jewish Woman*, www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/1414106/jewish/A-Mothers-Tears.htm.

[82] Fundamental text of Chabad Chassidic philosophy, written by the movement's founder, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi in the 18th century; Tanya" is the initial word of the book, which is also called *Likkutei Amarim* ("Collected Discourses") and *Sefer shel Beinonim* ("The Book of the Intermediates").

[83] *Kever Rachel* – Rachel's Tomb.

[84] Jacobson, Simon. "A Mother's Tears - Rachel Weeps for Her Children." *The Jewish Woman*, www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/1414106/jewish/A-Mothers-Tears.htm.

[85] *She-ashni b'tzelem Elohim* – "Who has made me in the image of God."

them in Their image and for a purpose is an integral step towards recovery and finding joy in life. Rachel's life teaches that each individual is necessary to the creation and betterment of the world. Each person has value. As Jacobson noted, the antithesis of dignity is worthlessness. The events of Rachel's life were less than ideal, yet, according to this interpretation, she never succumbed to self-loathing. Rachel's optimism is a necessary component of mental health healing.

Joseph

Joseph, Rachel and Jacob's eleventh son, climbed from the pit of isolation and sadness to a life more fulfilled. Joseph was Jacob's most prized possession, an interpreter of dreams, and was adored by his father disproportionately over his brothers. This caused Joseph's brothers to feel no shame by taking matters into their own hands and getting rid of their overly righteous brother. After throwing Joseph into a pit with the intention to leave him there to die, his brothers decided to instead pull him back out and sell him to the Ishmaelite traders passing by.[86] The next series of events led to Joseph's incarceration, where he made a name for himself by continuing to interpret dreams, this time of his fellow prisoners. Once Pharaoh caught wind of Joseph's interpreting gift, he called upon Joseph to interpret his own dreams. With Joseph's help, Pharaoh was able to save the people of Egypt from famine, and he thus deemed Joseph Vizier of Egypt. With the famine becoming severe in Canaan, Joseph's brothers traveled to Egypt for assistance. The story continues with deception and trickery as Joseph's brothers slowly

[86] Genesis 37:28 – "When Midianite traders passed by, they [the brothers] pulled Joseph up out of the pit. They sold Joseph for 20 pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites, who brought Joseph to Egypt." Trans. *JPS.*

recognized the brother they sold years ago. Joseph housed his brothers and his father in Egypt, and the family returned to a state of normalcy until the death of their father, Jacob.

What links Joseph to the conversation about mental health is how forgiveness played a part in his narrative. The role of forgiveness is key in mental health recovery and healing, particularly forgiveness of oneself for causing one's own trauma. Joseph could have taken revenge or hurt his brothers for the trickery they inflicted upon him years before they reconciled. *Or HaChaim* says that "Under Noachide law, once a person has committed the sin of kidnapping or robbery, he is guilty of the death penalty."[87] Joseph questions, "Am I then in God's place?"[88] feeling uncomfortable that it is assumed that he be given the opportunity to take the ultimate revenge upon his brothers. Instead, Joseph forgave their criminal act because he believed that their actions did not deserve to be condemned so harshly, and he could not possibly be like God, the creator and destroyer of life. When Joseph realized that his brothers were afraid that he could take revenge on them, "He was broken-hearted, telling them that he was far too God fearing, to act in such a manner."[89] Even though these two commentaries do not explicitly state Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers, they insinuate a sense of understanding and a compassion given by Joseph to his brothers. At the end of his story, Joseph attempted to employ as much compassion upon his loved ones, and consequently himself, as he swore not to set the death penalty upon them as the law said he could have done. This allowed for Joseph to continue without the guilt of harming his brothers and the knowledge that he rose above the ethics of their actions.

---

[87] *Or HaChaim* on Genesis 50:19:1. Eliyahu Munk, Lambda Publishers, 1998. *Sefaria.*
[88] Genesis 50:19, trans. *JPS.*
[89] *Daat Zkenim* on Genesis 50:19:1. Eliyahu Munk, Lambda Publishers, 1998. *Sefaria.*

Avivah Zornberg saw this not as an act of compassion but as an act of suppression. "In his anxiety to reveal the end, to resolve the narrative in full meaning, Joseph suppresses the conflicts in his family and within himself."[90] Because Joseph so desperately wanted to move forward and forget the hurt and trauma, he instead created the potential for more internal and familial pain later. When one is stricken with grief or depression, it may be less hurtful in the moment to block out the painful narrative and suppress the trauma. This, however, may cause a buildup of pain that only continues to feel worse until the trauma is recognized and confronted head on. To Zornberg's point, what Joseph thought might have been an act of forgiveness could also be understood as an act of suppression that would only continue to hurt himself and his family. Therefore, forgiveness, of oneself or of others, is an explicit act that must be dealt with directly.

In addition, Joseph saw that the painful moments of his past still led him to a fruitful life, which he believed to be a blessing. Midrash *Tanchuma, Vayechi* 17 says of Genesis 50:15[91]:

> "What precisely did [Joseph's brothers] see? They saw Joseph returning from burying his father. He went to look at the pit into which they had thrown him. They thought, 'Perhaps Joseph still holds a grudge against us,' but Joseph had only good intentions. He had gone to the pit in order to recite this blessing: 'Blessed is He Who performed a miracle for me in this place.'"

What could have been the most tragic and destructive moment of Joseph's life – perhaps a moment to have ended his life – Joseph deemed a blessing. He looked backed upon all that positively arose for him due to the suffering he endured, and he called it a miracle.

---

[90] Zornberg, Avivah Gottlieb. *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious*. New York, Schocken Books, 2009.
[91] Genesis 50:15 - "And Joseph's brothers saw that their father had died." Trans, *JPS.*

Often in moments of pain and defeat what we need most is the reminder that life is a miracle.

Hannah

Read each year on Rosh Hashanah, the story of Hannah is a gut-wrenching tale of grief, sadness, and the emotional significance of prayer. 1 Samuel 1:1-2:10 follows Hannah, the barren wife of Elkanah, as she calls out to God for help in her barren state. Constantly being taunted by Penninah, Elkinah's other wife, for her inability to bear children, Hannah finally found solace in speaking her thoughts of despair and weeping to God in the temple. To Eli the Kohen,[92] Hannah's unusual way of praying made her look as though she was drunk; thus, Eli asked Hannah, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself?"[93] To this, Hannah replied that she wished for a child and was praying to God for such a wish to come true. Eli wished for God to grant Hannah what she prayed for, and then shortly after this encounter Elkanah and Hannah conceived. They named their son Samuel, meaning, "I asked God for him," and Hannah became a pray-er who changed the understanding of what prayer had been. Previously an act of duty and regularity, according to Rabbi Eliezer, prayer in its fixed state did "…not constitute 'pleading.'"[94] Hannah added the element of emotion back into a form of prayer that had become rote and regular.

This beautiful account of prayer and yearning sheds light on how deeply traumatic and isolating it can be to want what life, or one's own body, cannot give. Noticing her

[92] *Kohen* – Hebrew for "priest"
[93] 1 Samuel 1:14, trans. *JPS.*
[94] Mishnah *Berakhot* 4:4, trans. *Koren-Steinsaltz*

sadness, Elkanah asked, "Hannah, why are you crying, and why aren't you eating? Why are you so sad? Am I not more devoted to you than ten sons?"[95] In just this one verse, we see the connection between mind/spirit and body, and an emotion is assigned to the story's protagonist without her being the one to name it. Elkanah also suggested that Hannah's sadness was unwarranted since she was in an otherwise caring and devoted environment. Hannah's narrative is filled with judgment from others, which clouded her ability to express her emotions in a coherent way. Not only did Hannah feel judgment from Elkanah, but also from Eli. When asked by Eli if she was drunk, according to *Berakhot* 31b:1-3 Hannah stated, "Thou are not a lord; neither the Shechinah nor the Holy Spirit is with thee, for thou hast judged me in the scale of guilt and not in the scale of merit."[96] Hannah pleaded with Eli for compassion and grace as she knew that she had done nothing wrong, since a synagogue is a place of prayer, and praying was all she was doing. Yet more than this, Hannah's story sheds light on the importance of keeping others' emotional and mental states judgement-free. Only the individual is capable of honestly judging their own actions when in a state of depression or distress. The best way to help someone is to listen and positively encourage them, not to assume the worst of them. Both Elkanah and Eli made assumptions of Hannah's mental state instead of hearing what she thought and felt, and we see how detrimental making assumptions of someone's mental state can be.

Although a verbal response to Elkanah's question is unknown, Hannah summoned the strength to go to the temple in Shiloh and pray. Her sorrow could not be alleviated by food or drink, nor could she feel nourished by the inquiry or reassurances of

[95] 1 Samuel 1:8, trans. *JPS.*
[96] *Berakhot* 31b:1-3, trans, *Koren-Steinsaltz.*

others. Instead, she turned to her prayers, which she thought were being heard and experienced in solitude. Mind-body connection is the belief that a physical illness may stem from psychological or social factors. Hannah exhibited the loss of her appetite to such a degree that she could not eat until food was nearly forced upon her by Eli.[97] Hannah could not consume any nourishment for herself, perhaps both due to her severe depressed state as well (intentionally or unintentionally) depriving her body of physical care since her body was not taking care of her emotionally. This trope is common among the eating disordered community and captures the feelings of embarrassment, shame, and worthlessness because, "My body does not deserve care since it cannot care for me." Hannah was seen suffering from the negative impact of the mind-body connection until she was able to see the potential for hope and change in her future.

Hannah was made miserable by her barren womb, yet Hannah did not set words to her own emotions. Instead, Elkanah asked, *"V'lamah yeira l'vaveich?"*[98] ("Why are you so sad?") and then assigned Hannah's emotion to her when she did not have the ability to speak for herself. This moment with Elkanah foreshadowed Hannah's moments of prayer when she spoke but was so quiet that her words were inaudible. Perhaps Hannah did share with Elkanah her feelings, yet Hannah was too quiet or Elkanah did not pay her enough attention, so Hannah's words went unheard. For someone who is struggling to understand the depths of their own sorrow, it can feel like a loss of identity when someone other than oneself gives challenging emotions a name; however, it can also be relieving when someone puts a name to the feeling one might not yet be able to identify. When feeling depleted and at a loss for words, the burden of emotion can be

[97] 1 Samuel 1:20, trans. *JPS.*
[98] 1 Samuel 1:9, trans. *JPS.*

lifted by giving someone else the chance to put into words how the intense emotions are being perceived.

When loved ones of someone struggling with depression have never experienced mental illness, it can be challenging for them to comprehend how a person could feel depression when they are being surrounded by such loving support. Elkanah exhibited this disbelief when he asked Hannah, *"Halo anochi tov lach ma'asarah banim?"* ("Am I not more devoted to you than ten sons?"). For the loved one, to understand something one has never been through can also feel lonely. When depression sets in, after caring for and loving someone so deeply, it can feel to the caretaker that their care was not enough. Elkanah displayed unconstructive behavior that many caretakers fall victim to by making Hannah's depression about himself. While trying to understand how Hannah could feel so much pain, Elkanah asked why he was not enough for her. When the onlooking party inquires what they have not done well enough to "prevent" the depression, they are adding another layer of guilt, shame, and harm to the depressed person. Instead of adding his own guilt and shame to Hannah's, Elkanah could have listened to her grief as a consoling partner. However, often this type of reaction stems from wanting to be an understanding and helpful partner. Elkanah's concern showed that even when one feels most isolated in their emotions and mental health, one may not, in fact, be alone.

Job

One of life's most challenging questions is, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" Clergyperson after clergyperson has spoken and written about this theodicy,[99]

[99] Theodicy – the attempt to defend God.

notably Rabbi Harold Kushner with his book aptly titled, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People.*[100] Kushner attempted to comfort those in their suffering by writing that God comforts those in their suffering, although God cannot always prevent hardship. The criticisms of Kushner's thesis are many, and the various other beliefs are numerous; however, this concept of not only "Why do bad things happen to good people?" but "When bad things *do* happen to good people, what happens next?" are inquiries explored by Jewish texts and characters throughout the ages. One of the primary stories focusing on theodicy is the Book of Job. The Book of Job is structured as prose bookending poetic conversations between Job and his three friends. Job was the most blessed, righteous, and pious man.[101] While God welcomed Job's piety, Satan wondered if Job had not been blessed materialistically, would Job's piety shift and would he curse God? Willing to join in on the experiment, God allowed Satan to harm Job[102] by afflicting him with boils,[103] killing his children,[104] and taking all he owned. Yet, even as all those horrific events happened, "Job did not sin nor did he cast reproach on God."[105] As Job sat with his friends Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, Job began to cry out, "Why does He [God] give light to the sufferer and life to the bitter in spirit,"[106] for Job believed that he did nothing to deserve such atrocities. However, when his friends asked, "Think now, what innocent man ever perished? Where have the upright been destroyed?"[107] they were essentially telling him that he must have committed a sin, since they believed that suffering was

---

[100] Kushner, Harold S. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People: 20th Anniversary Edition, with a New Preface by the Author*. New York, Schocken Books, 2001.
[101] Job 1:1, trans. *JPS.*
[102] Job 1:12, trans. *JPS.*
[103] Job 2:7, trans. *JPS.*
[104] Job 1:18-19, trans. *JPS.*
[105] Job 1:22, trans. *JPS.*
[106] Job 3:20, trans. *JPS.*
[107] Job 4:7, trans. *JPS.*

punishment for one's sins. Job responded that they were not being comforting, and he continued to call out to God as to why he was punished but the wicked were not. *"Tziyah gam-chom yig'z'lu meimei-sheleg sheol hata'u"* – "May drought and heat snatch away their snow waters, and Sheol,[108] those who have sinned,"[109] says Job in frustration with God. God's response came in the form of a *sa'ar*,[110] and God, in turn, challenged Job, saying *"Mi zeh machshich tzeiah vimliyn b'li-da'at?"* – "Who is this who darkens counsel, speaking without knowledge?"[111] God reminds Job of God's divine nature and Job acknowledges God's power and the limits of his own wisdom by stating, *"Al kein emas v'nichamti al-afar v'eifer."*[112] Job recognizes the dust and ashes from whence he came and restores his faith in God. This understanding of huma versus Divine power is the comforting message of the story of Job, as it expresses that there are limits to being human, and while God may not punish people for specific things, God does have Divine power.

Job, one of the *Tanach's* deepest sufferers shows that it is a human instinct to question God and even to be angry with God when one is in distress. Yet because God can feel like such an unexplainable concept, it is easiest, in the darkest of moments, to assume that one is being punished when suffering. Theologians have written through the ages about why bad things happen to good people, and while no one is able to give a definitive answer, one interpretation of the Book of Job is that no matter the suffering,

---

[108] *Sheol* – The place where the dead reside, according to the *Tanach.*
[109] Job 24:19, trans. *JPS.*
[110] *Sa'ar* – tempest, storm, whirlwind – Job 38:1, trans. *JPS.*
[111] Job 38:2, trans. *JPS.*
[112] Job 42:6 – "Therefore, I recant and relent, being but dust and ashes." Trans. *JPS*

"It's not your fault."[113] God is not vindictive, and one does not inflict harm on one's future self when there is a slip up or sin. For those suffering with mental health crises, it can be both devastating as well as relieving to assume that the mental turmoil is a product of past missteps. One the one hand, being able to "blame" suffering on something else can bring a release that does not truly allow for the hard work of recovery to take place. The same is true when one realizes that nothing previously done caused the mental stress, because now this person must try to understand and work through the turmoil being felt. Yet, despite the pain and suffering, believing that mental illness is not a punishment or consequence of previous misdeeds, can allow for the healing process to be more of a shared and communal experience. This allows for more dialogue and openness, so that mental health can become a conversation about which no one need be ashamed.

When Job experienced tragedy, his friends Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar attempted to comfort him by visiting and staying with him. While Job expressed to them that they were "mischievous comforters,"[114] it is important to remember that his friends acted upon their friendship and went and sat with Job when he needed it. They might not have said what could have been most comforting in the moment, but his friends employed the Jewish obligation of *bikkur cholim,*[115] visiting the sick. They sat with him "…on the ground for seven days and seven nights,"[116] for the period of *shiva* so that Job could grieve, and neither of his friends spoke a word of advice until after the *shiva* period. Rashi believed that Job's friends did not recognize him "because his face had changed as

---

[113] Geringer, Rabbi Kim S. *Sometimes It's Not Your Fault*. Yom Kippur Morning.
[114] Job 16:2, trans. *JPS.*
[115] *Bikkur Cholim* – The *mitzvah* of visiting the sick.
[116] Job 2:13, trans. *JPS.*

a result of the agonies."[117] Nevertheless, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar all initially appeared to comfort Job as best they could. This act of compassion and caring for the sick is integral in the healing and recovery from mental illness. Perhaps, like Job's friends, the advice will not always be welcomed or helpful, but the act of appearing beside the one in need is critical to the sufferer's understanding that they are not alone. Even though not everyone may be able to understand the emotional distress and trauma their loved one may be going through, they can help to move healing forward by simply sitting with their loved one in silence, as Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar initially did, reminding Job that he was not alone.

King David

King David's story appears in the two Books of Samuel. David was the son of Jesse[118] and a harpist[119] who fought against and slayed the giant Goliath.[120] David soon became a favorite for the throne, causing the then-king, Saul, to attempt to kill David.[121] This caused David to go into hiding[122] where he is thought to have written the 150 psalms in the Book of Psalms. King David is perhaps the biblical character most often associated with depression. King David had many meaningful relationships with both men[123] and women[124] throughout his life. He was particularly judged for the swooning women[125]

---

[117] Rashi on Job 2:12, *English translation by Victor E. Reicert, Soncino Press, 1946.*
[118] Jesse – Father of David, I Samuel 16 – "I am sending you, Jess the Bethlehemite, for I have decided on one of his sons to be king." Trans. *JPS.*
[119] I Samuel 23, trans. *JPS.*
[120] I Samuel 17:4-11, trans. *JPS.*
[121] I Samuel 19 – "Saul urged his son Jonathan and all his courtiers to kill David." Trans. *JPS.*
[122] I Samuel 24 – "David hid in the field." Trans. *JPS.*
[123] II Samuel 1:26 – "I grieve for you, my brother Jonathan, You were most dear to me. Your love was wonderful to me more than the love of women." Trans. *JPS.*
[124] It is known that David had at least three wives: Michal, Abigail, and Batsheva
[125] 1 Samuel 25:23 – "When Abigail saw David, she quickly dismounted from the ass and threw herself face down before David, bowing to the ground." Trans. *JPS.*

who followed him and the advances that he allowed both to him and from him. His wife, Michal,[126] expressed her disgust that David allowed for such frolicking with other women, but David showed no remorse and instead used his dancing to lift his spirits.[127] The need to lift his spirits by dancing with multiple women is a hint to King David's melancholia. Often, when suffering from melancholia, the sufferer retreats into a reserved and isolated state; yet sometimes individuals cope with their depression by overly asserting themselves and pushing to the opposite end of the spectrum of isolation.

King David found himself intertwined with Batsheva,[128] wife of Uriah,[129] as he saw her bathing and called to her to lie with him.[130] She later found out that she was with child, and King David did all he could do to make Uriah return from war so that it would appear that Uriah was the child's father. It is thought by the Midrash[131] that David used his affair with Batsheva as a tactic against God in the hope that God would admit that David was as important to God as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Upon asking God, "Why not the 'God of David?'"[132] God replied: "I put the patriarchs to the test, and they withstood My trials, but I did not put you to the test."[133] This was David's attempt at feeling worthy and valued in a way that he had never felt before. However, God's response was an indication that David had failed and that he, in fact, was not held by God in the same regard as the patriarchs. This was potentially a great disappointment that provoked in David an even deeper depression. Not only did he feel that he was not

[126] Michal – Daughter of Saul
[127] II Samuel 6:16, trans. *JPS.*
[128] Batsheva – Wife of Uriah the Hittite and King David, whose story appears in the Book of Samuel
[129] Uriah – the Hittite warrior and husband of Batsheva
[130] BT Sanhedrin 107a, trans. *Koren-Steinsaltz.*
[131] *Midrash Yalkut* of II Samuel, trans. *JPS.*
[132] ibid
[133] BT Sanhedrin 107 a-b, trans. *Koren-Steinsaltz.*

worthy of the life he wanted to lead, but God was telling him that he was not as worthy as others. While God might not have been saying that David lived a worthless life, for someone battling depression, such as King David, it is often easiest to see the most negative side of an argument.

King David's experiences with Batsheva and Tamar, his daughter, elicit very different psychological reactions from David. Whereas David was seen weeping and pleading with God over the death of Batsheva's child,[134] he responds with silence over the rape of Tamar.[135] This could indicate that David felt complicit in the rape of his daughter and did not know how to emotionally grapple with such intense feelings. Instead of attempting to deal with anything that he was experiencing, David shut down and became silent in the aftermath of tragedy.

King David's life was complex and filled with hints of melancholia, yet the clearest indication of David's depression is found in Psalms. King David is often considered to be the author of the 150 psalms.[136] Many of the psalms are joyous and call for praise of God; however, there are many that are filled with pain and anguish, leading readers to believe that the writer was filled with turmoil. Psalm 38 says, *"Ki avonotai avru roshi k'masha chaveid yich'b'du mimeni,"* "For my inquiries have overwhelmed me; they are like a heavy burden, more than I can bear."[137] Psalm 13 reads, *"Ad anah asheit etzot b'nafshi yagon bilvavi,"* "How long will I have cares on my mind, grief in my heart all day?"[138] The 150 psalms are filled with statements and questions of great

[134] II Samuel 21 – "While the child was alive you fasted and wept; but now that the child is dead, you rise and take food!" Trans. *JPS.*
[135] 2 Samuel 13, trans. *JPS.*
[136] *Ketuvim* – The third part of the Tanach, which includes Psalms, Proverbs, Job, *Shir HaShirim*, Ruth, *Eicha, Kohelet,* Esther, Daniel, Ezra, & Chronicles.
[137] Psalms 38:5, trans. *JPS.*
[138] Psalms 13:3, trans. *JPS.*

despair. However, while many of the psalms read as helpless and hopeless, they often end in phrases such as, *"Va'ani b'chasdecha vatachti yagel libi bishuatecha"* ("But I trust in Your faithfulness, my heart will exult in Your deliverance"),[139] showing the writer's faith in God and ultimately rejoicing in God's goodness. This juxtaposition of verses within a given psalm suggests the juxtaposition of feelings King David may have experienced, similar to how a person in a depressive state may also have feelings of joy and elation. Five specific psalms will be analyzed later in this chapter and looked at as ways to help with mental health healing and recovery.

[139] Psalm 13:6, trans. *JPS.*

Analysis of Mental Health in Five Psalms

The analyzed psalms were chosen due to their already vast usage in liturgical settings and/or their rising popularity in the contemporary prayer spaces.

Psalm 16

Psalm 16 reads as a love letter to God. Most often sung aloud at funerals or lifecycle events surrounding death and its commemoration, Psalm 16 states one's unwavering faith in God. Right from the beginning of the verse it is read, "…there is none above You,"[140] which is often translated to, "I have no good but in You." This psalm is an affirmation of God's importance in one's life and a reassurance that God will move alongside at every moment. Interestingly, the concept of God being "at my right hand"[141] and the total belief that God will not let one falter or "allow Your pious one to see the pit"[142] can be comforting and also have detrimental consequences to someone working their way through mental illness. On the one hand, someone searching for a way through recovery needs to feel support and safety. Yet putting complete faith in something or someone can mean a lack of accountability on the part of the patient.

Psalm 16 addresses to this dichotomy with the use of the word, *"shiviti."*[143] *Shiviti* meaning, "I have placed," is related to the word *hishtavut,* which means "equanimity." From *Tzaavat HaRivash*[144] 1:2 it is understood that employing *hishtavut* in

[140] Psalm 16:2 טּוֹבָתִי בַּל־עָלֶיךָ, trans. *JPS.*
[141] Psalm 16:8 שִׁוִּיתִי יְהוָה לְנֶגְדִּי תָּמִיד כִּי מִימִינִי בַּל־אֶמּוֹט׃ trans. *JPS.*
[142] Psalm 16:10, trans. *JPS.*
[143] Psalm 16:8, trans. *JPS.*
[144] *Tzaavat HaRivash* – A collection of Teaching from the Baal Shem Tov specifically regarding the Divine.

our actions, staying calm and even tempered with an understanding of God's presence, is the highest level of holiness that one can reach in their own actions This is to say that all actions, both good and bad, are done with a dedication to God and are seen as "proper in God's eyes."[145] Therefore, when a person is unable to pray, learn, or focus in the way that they are supposed to, they must find another way to serve God in that moment. Hafiz[146] writes of equanimity in the poem entitled, "Perfect Equanimity:"[147]

> "Look how a mirror will reflect with perfect equanimity all actions before it.
> There is no action in this world that will ever cause the mirror to look away.
> There is no act in the world that will ever make the mirror say, 'no.'
> The mirror, like perfect love, will just keep giving of itself to all before it…"

Psalm 16 uses *shiviti* in a similar way as Hafiz speaks of a mirror. The mirror always has something to give. The mirror's purpose and intention is love. Psalm 16 does not say that one will always do everything in the right way. Instead, it says that a person will always have the right *intention*. This allows for one to falter and make missteps without all progress going to waste. This concept is integral in any recovery process. There must be room for movement backward. Falling back and relapsing is inevitable and part of the process, so if one can reframe the movement backward, and focus on what the positive intention was, then one is helping to set themself up for success and movement forward in the recovery and healing process.

Psalm 23

Like Psalm 16, Psalm 23 is also heard most often when in situations surrounding death and has been set to music with beautiful, yet haunting settings. Psalm 23 is often

[145] *Tzaavat HaRivash* 1:2, trans. *JPS.*
[146] Hafiz – A Persian poet, circa 1325.
[147] "Perfect Equanimity" – written by Hafiz.

referred to as *"Adonai Ro'i,"* or "The Lord is My Shepherd." Analyzed by many clergy people and theologians including Rabbi Harold Kushner,[148] Psalm 23 suggests that someone walking through "the valley of the shadow of death"[149] should not be scared or upset for "You [God] are with me."[150]

In his book, *The Lord is My Shepherd,* Rabbi Harold Kushner suggests that Psalm 23 can be read "…as a drama in three acts."[151] Kushner goes on to explain that Act one is "serene, pastoral…Act two turns dark and stormy…act three…God now offers him something more permanent, an invitation to dwell in His house."[152] In Kushner's "Act two" he describes the psalmist "find[ing] himself alone in a dark valley. Then he learns that he is not really alone. He comes to see God not only as the source of the good things in his life, but as the source of comfort and consolation in hard times. He comes to understand that only because God was with him was he able to find his way out of the darkness."[153] With the understanding that emerging from the pit of darkness is not something that one can do alone, and that God is always present, the psalmist finds himself coming into the light. The light of Psalm 23 is specific to dwelling in the House of God, which is often assumed to be where one resides post-death, since Psalm 23 is a common funeral piece. However, for those struggling with mental health, this "dwelling in the House of God" can mean living with God as a partner through the rest of one's days. Once one has done the hard work to emerge from the darkness and has felt the

---

[148] Kushner, Harold S. *The Lord Is My Shepherd: Healing Wisdom of the Twenty-Third Psalm*. New York, Anchor Books, 2004.
[149] Psalm 23:4 גַּם כִּי־אֵלֵךְ בְּגֵיא צַלְמָוֶת, trans. *JPS.*
[150] Psalm 23:4 לֹא־אִירָא רָע כִּי־אַתָּה עִמָּדִי, trans. *JPS.*
[151] Kushner, Harold S. *The Lord Is My Shepherd: Healing Wisdom of the Twenty-Third Psalm*. New York, Anchor Books, 2004.
[152] ibid
[153] ibid

partnership of God through that distress, one must continue to live knowing that they are not alone, and that God will always be with them.

As dangerous as it could be to think of the psalms that speak about death as a form of healing and recovery for mental health patients, for many who suffer from severe depressive states, going through life in a depressed way can feel as though one is on the verge of death and merely not living at all. This psalm can be useful for someone in their darkest days, as it gives hope that God is always with those in need of comfort. The verse that particularly speaks to our deepest demons is: *"Ta'aroch l'fanai shulchan neged tzor'rai,"*[154] – "You spread a table for me in full view of my enemies." When relating Psalm 23 to mental health, instead of viewing the word *"tzor'rai"* as "enemies" – a noun – *"tzor'rai"* can be looked at in the verb form meaning, "to suffer distress." This translation turns the "enemies" from external to internal. No longer are we speaking about literal others who have caused us distress, but we are interpreting the enemies as ourselves and the ways in which we place distress upon ourselves. Coupling this understanding of *"tzor'rai"* along with the imagery of God always being alongside the one in need of comfort, Psalm 23 becomes a beautiful statement of hope for those in need of healing and recovery through mental health illness.

Psalm 27

In her book, *Opening Your Heart with Psalm 27*, Rabbi Debra J. Robbins writes, "The words of Psalm 27 encourage us to revisit the challenging moments of life and

[154] Psalm 23:5, trans. *JPS.*

awaken our memories so that we can reflect and learn."[155] This sentiment is perhaps the reason why reading Psalm 27 has been a daily practice during the High Holy Day season since the middle of the 18th century. The reading of Psalm 27 is a 52-day practice, which starts with the entire month of *Elul*[156] and concludes at the end of *Sukkot*.[157] This leaves ample opportunity for the reciters to find and experience various aspects of Psalm 27 that may resonate with them differently throughout the 52-day period. Of the fourteen verses in this psalm, verse 4 stands out more than others. It reads: "One thing I ask of Adonai, only that do I seek: to live in the house of Adonai all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of Adonai, to frequent God's temple."[158] Aside from being a beautiful verse and sentiment, these words are filled with incredible yearning for acceptance and holiness.

The Talmud teaches that each person is to say one hundred blessings a day for two reasons, the first reason based on Deuteronomy 10:12 in which Moses asks the Jewish people, "What does God ask of you?" In this case the Talmud says to read the word "*mah,"* meaning "What," as "*me'ah"*, meaning "100." Thus, through Moses, God obligates everyone to recite 100 blessings a day.[159] The second reason to recite 100 blessings a day is because when King David ruled, it was said that 100 people died every day of a plague. Once the sages implemented the 100 blessing a day rule, the plague ended.[160] However, perhaps the most interesting aspect of reciting 100 *brachot*[161] daily is

---

[155] Robbins, Debra J. *Opening Your Heart with Psalm 27: A Spiritual Practice for the Jewish New Year.* New York, Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2019. P. XXV
[156] *Elul* – the Hebrew month prior to *Rosh Hashanah*
[157] *Sukkot* – the Jewish "Festival of Booths," which begins on the 15th day of the first month of the year, *Tishrei*
[158] Psalm 27:4, trans. *JPS.*
[159] *Orach Chaim* 46:3, trans. *Sefaria Community Translation.*
[160] *Midrash Rabba* – Numbers 18:17, trans. based on the Metsudah linear siddur, by Avrohom Davis 1981.
[161] *Brachot* – Hebrew for "blessings."

that the Sages believed that to recite 100 blessings means to be righteous, a *tzaddik.*[162] This theory comes from the letter *koof*[163] of *"tzaddik,"* since *koof* is equal to 100 in *gematria.*[164] All of this context is imperative to note since the psalmist in Psalm 27 only asks for one thing – *achat sha'alti.* If Jews are obligated to ask for 100 things from God a day, why does the psalmist stop at one? Rabbi Robbins concludes that the 100 blessings a day are, in fact, asking for a similar outcome, as she writes, "All day, every day, one hundred times a day, I ask one thing: Please, receive my prayer, I am alive in Your house, and I am so grateful."[165] This understanding adds extra intention to the "one thing" that the psalmist is asking of God. This desire is not only to live in the house of God for the rest of one's days, but, even more important, for God to hear the prayers of the psalmist, of the one in need. The prayers are being heard if one then lives the rest of one's days in the house of Adonai; but in this verse a yearning to be heard and understood is paramount – just as is the yearning of someone struggling with depression and mental health. In that state, it can feel as if one is not being listened to or understood. The desperation for recognition that life can be immensely challenging can feel like the only plea one is able to focus on. Like Psalm 118:5, Psalm 27:4 calls out from the depths for an answer – an answer to be heard in the emotional challenges of life.

[162] *Tzaddik* – Hebrew for "righteous."
[163] Koof – ק.
[164] *Gematria* – the practice of assigning numerical value to Hebrew letters.
[165] Robbins, p. 29.

Psalm 118

This lengthy psalm is an ode to God's love and light for God's people. Most of the psalm is made up of examples of faithfulness such as, "I shall not die but live and proclaim the works of the Lord."[166] Psalm 118 is also the basis of many popular verses chanted and sung during Hallel.[167] Verses such as, *"Zeh hayom asah Adonai nagilah v'nism'cha vo"* ("This is the day that God has made. Let us exult and rejoice on it."),[168] *"Ana Adonai hoshiah na, ana Adonai hatzlicha na"* ("Oh God, deliver us! Oh God, let us prosper!"),[169] and *"Hodu la'Adonai ki-tov ki l'olam chasdo"* ("Praise God for God is good, God's steadfast love is eternal.").[170] As made clear by the ways in which verses from this psalm are used in the calendrical cycle of the year, Psalm 118 is often recited in moments of praise and joy.

However, verse 5 of Psalm 118 elicits a different feeling of reverence for God, which has become an anthem for those who have felt the depths of pain and wish to express that distress. Psalm 118:5 reads, *"Min hameitzar karati Yah anani vamerchav Yah"* – "In distress, I called on God; and God answered me and brought me relief."[171] Related to the word *Mitzrayim* (Egypt), *meitzar* literally means "constricted place." God states throughout the Torah, "I am Adonai, your God, who brought you out of *Mitzrayim* (Egypt)." It is understood from *Mei HaShiloach,* Volume 1, Leviticus, *Behar*[172] that *Mitzrayim* and other forms of the root for *meitzar* are used to show "how pleasures of the

---

[166] Psalm 118: 17 :לֹא־אָמוּת כִּי־אֶחְיֶה וַאֲסַפֵּר מַעֲשֵׂי יָהּ, trans. *JPS.*
[167] *Hallel* – meaning "praise," these specific psalms are read during festival occasions.
[168] Psalm 118:24, trans. *JPS.*
[169] Psalm 118:25, trans. *JPS.*
[170] Psalm 118:29, trans. *JPS.*
[171] Psalm 118:5, trans. *JPS.*
[172] *Mei HaShiloach*, Volume 1, Leviticus, Behar, trans. *Sefaria Community Translataion.*

world that do not come from holiness are rooted in narrowness and constriction."[173] This analysis of *meitzar* and its usage throughout the *Tanach* brings hope that "pleasure" can come from moments of deepest despair.

Meitzar is commonly used in the *Tanach* and its commentaries. *Likutei Moharan,* Part 11 79:1[174] speaks to the death of Jacob as if he was in the *batzar* (the straits), meaning the end of his days. Jacob says to his son, Joseph, that Jacob must not be buried in *Mitzrayim* (Egypt, and in this case also translated to "the narrowness of the throat), especially when he is in the *batzar* (the straits). The Prophet Isaiah demands, "Cry out from the throat; don't hold back."[175] *Likutei Moharan 62:5* links this to *meitzar and mitzrayim* saying that Avram went to *Mitzrayim* to moisten the *metizar* of the throat so that his throat would no longer be dry. If one does not have a dry throat, then one is able to "Cry out from the throat," as Isaiah wishes. The imagery of the *meitzar*, the straits or constricted places of life, is common throughout Jewish texts and writings; yet there is most often a pleasure, or a positive outcome once one has found themself in the *meitzar.* According to Psalm 118, once the psalmist called out from the *meitzar*, the psalmist saw that God was there to reach out and help guide the psalmist from the place of constriction.

Rabbi Danielle Upbin suggests that the word *Yah* is not only a name for Adonai but also means "breath of life." When the words *"merchav Yah"* from Psalm 118:5 are read, they should be translated as "wide open space" – the breath of life. Rabbi Upbin

---

[173] *Mei HaShiloach* – "Living Waters" – a collection of Rabbi Mordechai Leiner's commentary and sermons.
[174] *Likutei Moharan*, Part 11 79:1, trans. *Moshe Mykoff, Breslow Research Inst.,* 1986-2012.
[175] Isaiah 58:1, trans. *JPS.*

suggests, “It doesn’t erase the root cause of our trouble, but it does provide us with the foundation to master our next step.”[176] This verse is just that – a foundation, an encouragement of how to take the next step forward out of the *meitzar*. It is a reminder that one cannot always will oneself out of darkness. There are steps that one must take to emerge into from the narrow places. One of those steps is recognizing how common it is for the Jewish people to have been found in these narrow ad constricted places, as well as how common it has been for the Jewish people to make their way out of those straits.

Psalm 121

When the Kotzker Rebbe[177] was five years old, he asked his father, “Where is God?” to which his father answered: “God is everywhere!” The Kotzker Rebbe then responded, “No, I think God is only where you let Him in.”[178] Psalm 121 is an example of the Kotzker Rebbe’s notion that God exists where one allows for God to be. The psalm begins with the literal ascent of the eyes looking toward the mountains to find God. *“Shir lama’alot. Esa einai el heharim me’ayin yavo ezri,”*[179] (“A song of ascents. I turn my eyes to the mountains; from where will my help come?”). This first verse asks not only the Kotzker Rebbe’s question, “Where is God?” but also suggests the need for partnership and help. In verse 1, there is a yearning for guidance. If reading this from a mental health lens, the patient asking this question has already taken several steps

[176] Upbin, Rabbi Danielle. “Min Ha-Meitzar: Calling to God from the Depths.” *Jewish Press of Pinellas County*, 8 Sept. 2021, www.jewishpresspinellas.com/articles/min-ha-meitzar-calling-to-god-from-the-depths/.
[177] Kotzker Rebbe – Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, a rabbi and Chasidic leader in the early 1800s.
[178] *The Sayings of Menahem Mendel of Kotsk*. Simcha Raz: Edward Levin.1995
[179] Psalm 121:1 שִׁיר לַמַּעֲלוֹת אֶשָּׂא עֵינַי אֶל־הֶהָרִים מֵאַיִן יָבֹא עֶזְרִי׃, trans. *JPS.*

forward to help themselves simply by asking the question "Where will my help come from?" So often those in need are unable to trust that help is necessary to move forward. Asking for help is not easy and can often feel defeatist at a time when one is already feeling defeated. To lift the eyes upward in hope and ask for help to live more positively is a large step towards healing and recovery.

The answer to Psalm 121:1 follows immediately with the response, *"Ezri me'im Adonai oseh shamayim va'aretz"*[180] ("My help comes from God, maker of heaven and earth"). This answer points specifically to God as the source of help and healing, and verses 3-8 of Psalm 121 continue to say that God is great and helpful to the psalmist. While God may be an excellent partner in traversing life's mountains, thinking of God as a means of help is not always the tangible help that one needs when trying to pull oneself out from the depths of depression. It is possible that God, in this instance, is seen as God's people, for everyone has divinity within them. Kabbalist Rabbi Isaac Luria[181] taught, "There is no sphere of existence including organic and inorganic nature, that is not full of holy sparks, which are mixed in with the *kelippot* (husks) and need to be separated from them and lifted up."[182] This teaching suggests that there is a divine spark in each person; therefore, when one looks to God for help, one is actually looking to their fellow person for help.

Psalm 121 is filled with merism,[183] referencing that "The guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps,"[184] and "By day the sun will not strike you, nor the moon by

[180] Psalm 121:2, trans. *JPS.*
[181] Rabbi Isaac Luria – 16th century Kabbalist who revolutionized the study of Jewish mysticism.
[182] Rabbi David Cooper, *God is a Verb: Kabbalah and the Practice of Mystical Judaism.*
[183] Merism – a rhetorical device used to describe two contrasting parts referring to the whole.
[184] Psalm 121:4 - הִנֵּה לֹא־יָנוּם וְלֹא יִישָׁן שׁוֹמֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל׃, trans. *JPS.*

night."[185] These notions that God is all encompassing and can be a protector in any shape or form is theologically challenging if one believes that God is not and cannot be everything all the time. However, if Psalm 121's theology is the same as Rabbi Luria's thesis that there is a spark of divinity within each person, then "God" becomes not one being or strength to call upon, but, rather, a community of people who can rally around a person in need and help lift them up. Since individuals inhabit different skills, the concept of merism is less challenging to embrace. When someone helping the patient is in need of slumber, then another helper can assist in supporting the patient. By taking this Kabbalistic approach to God, looking to God for help becomes about creating a support system to help with challenging moments of mental health illness. Then the burden does not only exist within the suffering person to heal themselves, but it is spread out amongst the people who care for them and wish to help them lift their eyes toward the mountains.

[185] Psalm 121:6 - יוֹמָם הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ לֹא־יַכֶּכָּה וְיָרֵחַ בַּלָּיְלָה׃, trans. *JPS.*

Analysis of Five Musical Pieces Associated with Healing and Recovery

Music has the potential to transform one's emotional state and evoke deep understanding of one's emotions. Jewish music, when used as a means of healing and transformation, has particular power since the emotion of the music comes not only from the melodic notes, but also from lyrics, which can be liturgical, biblical, or reflective of Jewish philosophy or theology. This music finds its way deep into a community's or individual's soul and lives on as a form of healing through connection to the Jewish generations. This chapter will analyze the musical and lyrical choices of five pieces of Jewish music regarding healing and recovery from mental health issues.

Mi Shebeirach[186] – Debbie Friedman & Rabbi Drorah Setel

Debbie Friedman's setting of *Mi Shebeirach* has become part of the Jewish sacred music canon since she and Rabbi Drorah Setel conceived of this piece in the early 1990s. Since then, this *Mi Shebeirach* composition has been considered *mi Sinai*[187] and part of the Jewish liturgical music *zeitgeist.* It was first introduced to the Reform Movement in 1993 at the UAHC[188] Biennial in San Francisco, and then made its way into Reform and Conservative congregations across the globe. The traditional *Mi Shebeirach* is most often recited during a service in which the Torah is being read. In the presence of the Torah the worshipers ask for healing from God and the God of their ancestors to restore those who

---

[186] Friedman, Debbie. "*Mi Shebeirach*." *Sing unto God: The Debbie Friedman Anthology*, edited by Joel N. Eglash, Transcontinental Music Publications, 2014.
[187] *Mi Sinai* – an abbreviated form of *"halacha l'Moshe mi Sinai."* Jewish ethnomusicologist A.Z. Idelsohn began using this term as a way to identify Jewish music that felt to be the heart of Ashkenazi liturgical song. This term is now used to identify Jewish music that feels both part of the soul of a synagogue as well as old enough to forget from where it came.
[188] UAHC – Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

are ill and send them a *r'fuah shleima, r'fuat hanefesh ur'fuat haguf,* a complete healing of soul and of body. Friedman's piece weaves together the traditional Hebrew words of healing with her own personal understanding in English of the traditional word:

> *Mi shebeirach avoteinu, m'kor habracha l'imoteinu –*
> May the source of strength who blessed the ones before us, help us find the courage to make our lives a blessing. And let us say, Amen.
> *Mi shebeirach imoteinu, m'kor habracha l'avoteinu –*
> Bless those in need of healing with *r'fuah shleimah.* the renewal of body, the renewal of spirit. And let us say, Amen.

Written in the summer of 2002, Reform Judaism Magazine published an article by Hank Bordowitz that depicts Friedman's life as well as the inspiration for some of her pieces. To understand Friedman's translation, Bordowitz writes:

> "Her frequently performed '*Mi Sheberach*,' for example, was composed for a *Simchat Chochma*[189] (celebration of wisdom) ceremony honoring a woman friend on her 60th birthday. "My friend was having a very difficult time in her life, and a number of her friends were also struggling," Debbie explains. "Yet she had arrived at this age, and she was determined to embrace it. *'Mi Sheberach'* spoke to that."[190]

This origin story notes that Friedman had a very personal connection and reason for writing this piece of music. Because of this connection, Friedman chose to turn the prayer into not only a petition for healing but also a petition for hope. The English of the second verse of *Mi Shebeirach* stays fairly close to the traditional translation: "Bless those in need of healing with *r'fuah shleimah.* the renewal of body, the renewal of spirit." Yet the English of the first verse is truly Friedman and Setel's own spin on the traditional Hebrew. The traditional Hebrew reads, *Hu yivareich v'yirapei et hacholim. HaKadosh*

[189] *Simchat Chochma* – meaning "rejoicing in wisdom" – a celebration of female aging.
[190] Bordowitz, Hank. "Debbie Friedman: Singing unto God." *My Jewish Learning*, www.myjewishlearning.com/article/debbie-friedman-singing-unto-god/.

*Baruch Hu yimalei rachamim alav l'hachalimo ul'rap'oto l'hachaziko ul'chayoto v'yishlach lo bimheirah. "*May the Holy Blessed One overflow with compassion upon them to restore them, to heal them, to strengthen them, to enliven them. The One will send them, speedily, a complete healing."[191] Friedman and Setel decided to adapt these words by using the word "blessing" not only as a descriptor for God but also for the lives of each person who feels in need of healing. This verse switches the focus from God as the healer to the person who feels in need of healing as the arbiter of their own story. The words, "Help us find the courage to make our lives a blessing," are strong, empowering words that give an individual the agency to impact their own life. The idea that one could be a partner, or perhaps even a creator, in one's own healing felt revolutionary in the 1990s. Friedman and Setel's composition offered hope as well as a reminder that life is a blessing if we remember that life is a blessing.

The composition then shifts from the individual to the communal. "To make our lives a blessing" – healing begins with the individual. We cannot begin to help and heal someone else until we ourselves are feeling whole. This shifts outward: "Bless those in need of healing." Once we have focused on our own self and found some strength in life's blessing, it is our duty as Jewish people to help those in our community in need. *Pirkei Avot 2:16*[192] quotes Rabbi Tarfon, "It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it." In other words, we have a responsibility to the Jewish people to help one another if we feel we can do so. This goes as far as a big

---

[191] Weintraub, Rabbi Simkha Y. "Jewish Prayer for the Sick: *Mi Sheberach*." *My Jewish Learning*, www.myjewishlearning.com/article/mi-sheberakh-may-the-one-who-blessed/.

[192] *Pirkei Avot* 2:16 - הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לִגְמֹר, וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶן חוֹרִין לִבָּטֵל מִמֶּנָּה. – "He [Rabbi Tarfon] used to say: It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it." Trans. *Dr. Joshua Kulp.*

gesture like taking someone in and caring for them, to as small a gesture as praying for the healing of those we do not know. Friedman and Setel recognized the importance of expanding their *Mi Shebeirach* to include the entire community and the healing of all the Jewish people, because healing our people together is what we, as Jewish people, hold as one of our highest responsibilities.

At the 2001 Biennial in Boston, Massachusetts, Friedman played her setting of *Mi Shebeirach* for the entire contingent of attendees. She asked the audience to listen as she sang *Mi Shebeirach* solo once through before inviting the audience to join in, saying, "This one's for you." This had been and continued to be Friedman's trope, as she felt that it was important for people to include when thinking of those in need of healing.

Asher Yatzar[193] – Dan Nichols

Found in the Jewish morning liturgy, *Asher Yatzar* is recited upon going to the restroom. It is a blessing of thanksgiving for the functioning of the body, referring to the *nekavim* (openings) and *chalulim* (cavities), with gratitude for no blockages or ruptures during the excretion process:

> "Blessed are You, God, our God, sovereign of the universe, who formed humans with wisdom and created within him many openings and many hollows. It is obvious in the presence of Your glorious throne that if one of them were ruptured, or if one of them were blocked, it would be impossible to exist and stand in Your presence. Blessed are You, God, who heals all flesh and performs wonders."[194]

[193] Nichols, Dan. *Asher Yatzar*. 2016, dannicholsmusic.com.

[194] *Asher Yatzar* – Weekday and Shabbat morning liturgy, trans. *JPS.*
בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר יָצַר אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּחָכְמָה וּבָרָא בוֹ נְקָבִים נְקָבִים חֲלוּלִים חֲלוּלִים גָּלוּי וְיָדוּעַ לִפְנֵי כִסֵּא כְבוֹדֶךָ שֶׁאִם יִפָּתֵחַ אֶחָד מֵהֶם אוֹ יִסָּתֵם אֶחָד מֵהֶם אִי אֶפְשָׁר לְהִתְקַיֵּם וְלַעֲמֹד לְפָנֶיךָ אֲפִילוּ שָׁעָה אֶחָת. בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה רוֹפֵא כָל־בָּשָׂר וּמַפְלִיא לַעֲשׂוֹת.

There have been several musical settings composed for *Asher Yatzar*, most notably Debbie Friedman's medley of *Asher Yatzar* and *Elohai N'shama*[195]. This setting intertwines these two pieces of liturgy, which helps to illuminate the inextricable nature of the body and the soul. Jewish American composer, Dan Nichols, took a similar link between body and soul and created his own English translation to express this key concept:

> I thank you for my life, body, and soul.
> Help me realize I am beautiful and whole.
> I'm perfect the way I am, and a little broken too.
> I will live each day as a gift I give to you.
>
> Whoa.
>
> *Baruch Atah Adonai, rofei chol basar umafli la'asot.*

Whereas *Asher Yatzar* focuses primarily on the physical function and movement of the body, Nichols connects the body's functioning to a person's mental wellbeing. The Hebrew begins with, *"Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech haolam asher yatzar et ha'adam b'chochmah,"* meaning, "Blessed are You, Adonai, who created humans with wisdom." This "wisdom" is what helps people realize that the performance of the body does not equal the value of a person. No one's body is "perfect" since there is no definition of "perfection." No one's body works exactly how it is supposed to at every moment of every day. Everyone is a "little broken too."

In her thesis *From Curing to Crying: Determining God's Role in Healing for Those with Chronic Illness,* Rabbi Emily Aronson writes:

> "When someone becomes acutely sick, restoration of health is usually the expected goal and is not questioned. However, American society's obsession with

---

[195] *Elohai N'shama* – Weekday and Shabbat morning liturgy, trans. *JPS.*
אֱלֹהַי נְשָׁמָה שֶׁנָּתַתָּ בִּי טְהוֹרָה הִיא אַתָּה בְרָאתָהּ אַתָּה יְצַרְתָּהּ אַתָּה נְפַחְתָּהּ בִּי וְאַתָּה מְשַׁמְּרָהּ בְּקִרְבִּי.

> health and 'wellness' often extends beyond a simple understanding of a well-functioning body. It is assumed that "…anyone can control her/his health with the right diet, exercise, attitudes, relationships, or religious beliefs: it follows from most of them that those who are unhealthy are doing something wrong, and that, if they have been told how to take better care of themselves, they are acting irresponsibly."[196][197]

Dan Nichols' translation of *Asher Yatzar* takes this common societal attitude, agrees that "wellness" also applies to mental and emotional health, and flips the message to say that even with our challenges we are all still human beings worthy of love and blessing from God. According to the original Hebrew text, human beings are supposed to live to stand in God's presence. Nichols' final English phrase implies that each day that one lives, "broken" or not, is still a gift to God, and that no matter the "wholeness" of oneself, we are always allowed in the presence of Adonai.

Musically, Nichols begins the piece from the singular perspective. He focuses on language in the singular and leaves the instrumental backing sparse. He then transitions to a section that is filled with vocalized "whoas." This grows in instrumentation, voices, and energy. In just a short moment, Nichols expresses the importance of individuality as well as community when in need of both healing and the understanding that one's body is already "perfect." Nichols presents the idea of "perfection" from a mental and emotional standpoint. One must accept the body one has, and therefore learning to love one's body, flaws included, is a form of "perfection." This differs from Rabbi Emily Aronson's statement since Nichols is not analyzing the physicality of the body, rather the ways in

---

[196] Wendell, Susan. "Unhealthy Disabled: Treating Chronic Illnesses as Disabilities." Hypatia, vol. 16 no. 4, 2001, p. 17-33. (Page 30)

[197] Aronson, Emily. *From Curing to Crying: Determining God's Role in Healing for Those with Chronic Illness*. 2021, p. 23.

which one comes to terms with one's physicality. As the dynamism of the instrumentation and harmonies grows, it is as if the listener is being surrounded by more love, more support, more compassion. Nichols creates musical comfort for anyone experiencing any and all functions, or lack thereof, of their body. This is perhaps why Dan Nichols' *Asher Yatzar* was the most referenced Jewish musical piece mentioned by interviewees for Chapter 3. Even in times of deep pain and struggle to understand one's body and identity, there will always be a community of strength and support to help hold and heal the individual.

Akavya Ben Mahalalel[198] – Cantor Israel Alter

> Akavya ben Mahalalel said: "Mark well three things and you will not come into the power of sin: Know from where you come, and where you are going, and before whom you are destined to give an account and reckoning. From where do you come? From a putrid drop. Where are you going? To a place of dust, of worm, and of maggot. Before whom are you destined to give an account and reckoning? Before the Ruler, Ruler of rulers, the Holy One, blessed be Adonai." (*Pirkei Avot 3:1*)

Several cantors of the Golden Age of the Cantorate[199] composed musical settings of Akavya ben Mahalalel's words. However, no composition is quite as haunting as that of Cantor Israel Alter. Born in 1901, Alter was an Austro-Hungarian cantor who lived all over the world, ending in New York City at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion's School of Sacred Music.[200] While living in South Africa, Alter composed *Akavya ben Mahalalel*, which depicts the fragility of life and the importance of understanding where one has come from and where one is going.

---

[198] Alter, Cantor Israel. *Akavya Ben Mahalalel*. Unknown.
[199] Golden Age of the Cantorate – most often references Eastern European cantors in Europe and America in the early 1900s.
[200] Now the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion's Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music.

Alter provocatively begins the piece by repeating "*Akavya ben Mahalalel omer*" three times with growing accompaniment, energy, and agitation. This is as if to say, "Listen!" because the next thing that is sung are the words, "You must know these three things so that you do not sin." This phrase is repeated before putting music to the words, "Know for where you have come, know where you are going, and before whom you stand." Each of these three declarations grows in rhythm and texture as it continues to move higher up the musical staff. As the music reaches *"V'lifnei mi atah atid,"* meaning, "Know before whom you stand," Alter has the singer quickly vocalizing above the music staff with intensity and fervor. Alter's musical midrash is clear: knowing the ultimate Judge is essential to living a life free of sin. When the words *"mitipah srucha"* (a putrid drop) and *"afar, rimah, v'toleah"* (of dust, of worm, and of maggot) are sung, Alter thoughtfully moves the notation down towards the bottom of the musical staff illustrating the ground where the drop, dust, worm, and maggot all reside. Finally, in the most haunting moment musical moment of the piece, Alter inserts the opening musical phrase of Louis Lewandowski's *Kol Nidre*[201] between repetition of the phrase "*Atah atid litein din v'cheshbon"* ("Before whom are you destined to give account and reckoning?"). This homage to *Kol Nidre* is a clear reference to life and death. *Kol Nidre* is meant to illustrate the imagery of an open grave or our own funerals. Alter uses this imagery to create tension. His intention is to scare the listener into understanding the fragility of life, that if one has not realized the importance of *haKadosh Baruch Hu*[202] then one's own burial may be imminent.

[201] Sung on the High Holy Day of Erev Yom Kippur (Kol Nidre).
[202] *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* – meaning "The Holy One, blessed be He."

This account from Akavya ben Mahalalel is both humbling and terrifying, particularly when in a state of mental and emotional crises. When someone is contemplating the fragility of their own being and whether it is even possible to continue living, they are often already caught between the juxtaposition of their past and their present. The fear of letting down a support system and knowing that the future could include disappointment is a large emotional battle when struggling with depression and other mental health illnesses. *Akavya ben Mahalalel* suggests the extremity of these questions and puts an intense emphasis onto the importance of understanding the significance one's life. The way in which *Pirkei Avot 3:1* expresses Akavya ben Mahalalel's sentiments is not subtle or particularly compassionate, but it does require one to be intentional and thoughtful about one's life. Creating meaning out of intention is the first step to understanding the importance of one's life on earth, especially when suffering from a perpetual state of isolation and a sense of worthlessness.

Hashkiveinu[203] – Yehezkel Braun

Hashkiveinu, meaning "lay us down," is a prayer of hope for God's protection at nighttime. Recited during weekday and Shabbat evening worship, *Hashkiveinu* has been a particular source of theological challenge for Reform liturgists. The beginnings of the petition ask: "Lay us down to peace, Adonai our God, and raise us up to life, our protector, and spread over us the shelter of Your peace, and direct us with good advice before You, and save us for the sake of Your name," not a simple request but a relatively sensible one of God, especially when so mucch of the Jewish liturgy is based around

[203] Braun, Yehezkel. *Hashkiveinu*. Israel Music Institute, 1964.

protection and peace. Reform liturgists and musical composers have been drawn to the beauty of these words and have created gorgeous musical settings with modern midrashic takes on the ancient Hebrew text. However, most contemporary musical settings of *Hashkiveinu* as well as Reform siddurim omit the middle section of the prayer:

> "…and look out for us, and keep enemies, plagues, swords, famines, and troubles from our midst, and remove Satan from in front of us and from behind us, and cradle us in the shadow of Your wings, for You are God who guards us and saves us, for You are God. Our gracious and merciful protector, guard our departure and our arrival to life and to peace, from now and ever more…"

When *Hashkiveinu* was initially conceived during the Tannaitic[204] period (the 1st and 2nd centuries), Jews predominantly resided in the open areas in which "enemies, plagues, swords, famines" were likely to come their way. The need for protection was obvious. But a contemporary concern about this prayer is the use of Satan. This imagery is sometimes thought of as being antithetical to a progressive theology, wherein Satan is an irrational and illogical concept. However, one can argue that there is a place for both iterations of this prayer.

Yehezkel Braun was a Jewish composer born in Germany in 1922. Throughout his lifetime, he composed some beautiful settings of essential liturgical texts such as *V'ahavta, Mah Tovu, The Song of Solomon,* and of course *Hashkiveinu.* Braun's setting of *Hashkiveinu* is a perfect musical example of how to keep the full text of a piece of liturgy intact and relevant for every Jewish denomination's prayer service. One of the ways to do this is to look at the text and the musical word painting through the lens of mental illness and crisis. As the piece begins, one can already imagine the wings of God

[204] Tannaitic – Circa 10-200 CE.

spreading over the earth to provide shelter. Written for the organ, the accompaniment is sustained and stable as the vocal line moves quickly yet steadily, almost like a swift lullaby. The composition changes slightly when it reaches the imagery of "enemies, plagues, swords, famines." The pace of the vocal line quickens and rests near the top and above the staff and the dynamics grow; yet the sudden rapid movement is soon slowed as the image of Satan comes on the scene. The notes sweeten and return to the motif of the beginning of the piece. The composition continues to grow in dynamics and rhythm as the liturgy projects images of openness and God's protective wings of shelter.

Yehezkel Braun's setting of *Hashkiveinu* is not simple to sing. His rhythms are deceptively complex and take focus in order sing them in time with a sustained instrument, such as the organ. This complexity is reminiscent of the inner workings of mental health illnesses. For some, it is easier to put on a positive façade for the outside world than it is to convince themselves to believe that they are of a healthy and sound mind. Too often people go through their days with an inner monologue that does not represent what they project to the public. Minds are harried and troubled with their own internal plagues, and one does not always know how to share these emotions in a safe environment. In leaving the troubling imagery of Satan in his composition and creating a gentleness to it, Braun allows for people to feel comforted by their own fears - not comforted in the actual fear itself but comforted in the knowledge that having fears is a normal part of what it means to be human. Satan, in this context, is everyone's personal trauma and hardship. Everyone struggles and battles their own pain. Braun's setting of *Hashkiveinu* shares with singers and listeners alike that no one is alone in experiencing life's challenges.

Holy Holy Holy[205] – Cantor Natalie Young

Cantor Natalie Young's *Holy Holy Holy* is a poignant and important piece for anyone struggling with depression, anxiety, or other forms of mental health illnesses. Young shared in a recent interview that she reconnected with this piece, which she had composed earlier.

composed. A few years ago, as she was going through cancer treatment, Young revisited several songs that she had written years ago. *Holy Holy Holy* was among a few songs that "…spoke to me in this moment of needing healing." For Young, it was particularly special to hear a piece of music find new purpose in the world. "It was my own music, my own voice singing to me, and I was finding healing through that, and that is a really powerful thing."

Change is inevitable. With this, it seems obvious that the way one hears and interprets a piece of music at one moment may be different from the way one hears and interprets a piece of music years later. However, people do not always anticipate this change, often making the moment of realization a blessing of newfound understanding. For Natalie Young, her piece evolved because she, as the listener, had evolved. The composition had been completed and stored away, but the piece continued to grow and live and serve as a vehicle for change and healing.

Holy Holy Holy begins with multiple voices singing an "Ooo" in harmony, giving the listener the opportunity to prepare for a meditative and transformative state. The use

[205] Young, Cantor Natalie. *Holy Holy Holy*. 6 Feb. 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DbUwHd88KU.

of "Holy holy holy" echoes the *Kedusha*[206] and Isaiah 6:3: "Holy holy holy, the Lord of Hosts, the entire world is filled with glory." When this verse is chanted in the *Kedusha* it is done so as a repetition – the community calls out in response to the cantor. In Young's iteration, everyone calls out together.

Young uses the metaphor of God's holiness to describe the many aspects of nature and love, eventually describing holiness as "…the spark of God within me." The second verse of *Holy Holy Holy* is: "May the darkness within disappear with the faith that You're always near. Like a mountain born from the sea, the spark of God within me." As a person dwells in the depths of mental illness and pain, it is often a struggle to recognize the sacred that exists within the individual. Finding positive light and a sense of spirituality is often a step of recovery, and not an immediate answer to a plea for help when hurting most. It takes strength, courage, and a support system to remember that we are each made with a spark of God within. People are created *b'tzelem Elohim* (in the image of God) and therefore all emotions are filled with Godliness. Young also calls to the Godliness within us with words from the first verse "…soft and strong a voice from within." God has filled our hearts with love, and now we can reach within ourselves and find the inner peace for which we yearn. The words "soft and strong" are a subtle reminder of Elijah's experience of God's "still, small voice."[207] Elijah did not hear God's voice in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire. The Divine encounter came after the intensity that nature offered when all was still and focused. Young reminds listeners that

---

[206] *Kedusha* – meaning 'holiness,' is found in the Weekday and Shabbat morning *Amidah* liturgy.

[207] 1 Kings 19:12 – וְאַחַר הָרַעַשׁ אֵשׁ לֹא בָאֵשׁ יְהוָה וְאַחַר הָאֵשׁ קוֹל דְּמָמָה דַקָּה – After the earthquake – fire; but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire – a soft murmuring sound. 'Soft murmuring sound' is also commonly translated to 'still, small voice.' Trans. *JPS.*

the strength and courage to face challenging moments do not always come about in grandiose ways. Most often, mustering up courage involves a deep look at the intention and soul of a person. It takes time, solitude, stillness, and quiet. This "soft and strong voice from within" is just as powerful as hearing God's voice in the earthquake.

Holy Holy Holy concludes with voices harmoniously singing the title words. This communal singing is a reminder of the support that each person needs to realize their worth. Step one is to recognize the independent yearning for strength. Step two is to invite others in so that the community can hold and uplift those in need. Cantor Natalie Young's song *Holy Holy Holy* is a gorgeous interpretation of the trajectory of a person in despair who finds the light they need for healing.

Analysis of Clergy Interviews Regarding Mental Health and Healing

Much of my research has consisted of interviews with cantors and rabbis in the field who have experienced heightened depression and/or anxiety for an extended period. I initially reached out to several clergy people I had spoken to throughout the years on the topic of mental health with the hopes that they would be interested in having a conversation for this thesis. After I gathered a few interviews from those colleagues, I reached out to my cantorial and rabbinical colleagues and asked if they would put me in touch with anyone who they thought might have dealt with mental health and would be willing to speak with me. Lastly, I posted about my thesis topic in an American Conference of Cantors forum, seeking anyone I did not already know who might be interested in sharing about their mental health journeys. It was not shocking to me when only a few people were interested in speaking openly about their mental health. Due to younger generations' willingness to openly discuss topics that previously were stigmatized, especially mental health, it was even less shocking that most of those who wanted to speak were cantors who were between the ages of twenty and forty. I ended up speaking with eleven clergy people, 8 of whom are referenced in this chapter. Of those 8, 2 are rabbis and 6 are cantors. Their years since ordination range from 1 year out of school to 15 years out of school. Fascinatingly, only one of the 8 referenced interviewees uses he/him pronouns. Finding people who were willing to open up to a stranger and to be vulnerable about their mental health was challenging, and it is my hope that this thesis and chapter helps to prompt further conversation about mental health and the importance of speaking openly about mental health.

These interviews spanned the subtopics of depression, anxiety, prayer music in the context of healing for oneself and one's community, composing music as a means of personal healing and communal healing, singing as a means of personal healing, listening to and hearing music as a means of healing, and how music has served as a vehicle for healing within the congregations and communities each of the interviewed clergy people serve. These subtopics came about naturally throughout the interview process. Most of the interviews were prompted by a question about how music and mental health intersected for that individual, and then the interviewee would share as much or as little of their story as they wanted. Typically, the interview consisted of a sufficient amount of backstory and information about specific events, which were shared by the interviewee, and then a continued conversational interview about what had come up from information the interviewee had shared. Each interview was conducted with full intent to be written and spoken about with anonymity; therefore, proper nouns have been adjusted for privacy. Clergy and their quotes will be attributed to "Interviewee" with a number attached. i.e., "Interviewee 3." While this chapter will look specifically at communal versus individual understandings of music, it is important to remember throughout the analysis that "…there's the music for the sake of leading worship, and there's music for its own sake just so that you can have that escape."[208] Both are sacred and holy uses of music as a means of healing.

[208] Interviewee 5

Depression[209]

Music's role in healing through depression most often began, for those interviewed, as a secular musical experience. The interviewees who spoke about depression happened to all be cantors and found their ways to the cantorate after having lived through depression and emotional trauma. It was music that changed the emotional course of their lives. "Music was a companion walking with me during this time."[210] This concept of music as companion, partner, and even a manifestation of God, resonated throughout the clergy narratives.

The beginnings of music manifesting healing were often concrete moments in which those around the subjects recognized the power of music as healing, but the subjects themselves did not realize the power that music had on their mental health. As Interviewee 2 shared, "Music was all I could do." This was after his father had explicitly recognized the power music had on the interviewee by telling him, "Music is what you need to be doing with your life." This person, after having reflected in therapy for years following, realized the impact music had on their day-to-day journey, and he understood that those around him also saw the pain of depression in him and felt as though music would be his saving grace. Interviewee 3 expressed sheer joy and appreciation when sharing about her path to the cantorate and the support from the cantorial world. "This is exactly what I'm supposed to be doing. And instead of having to fight like I was fighting for everything in my world, it was just like, 'We want you and you belong here, and not

[209] Depression – "Depression is more than just sadness. People with depression may experience a lack of interest and pleasure in daily activities, significant weight loss or gain, insomnia or excessive sleeping, lack of energy, inability to concentrate, feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt and recurrent thoughts of death or suicide. Depression is the most common mental disorder." – apa.org, *American Psychiatric Association*, adapted from the *Encyclopedia of Psychology*

[210] Interviewee 1

only do we want you to belong here, but we are so frickin' excited about you!' It was this joy!"[211] Yet no matter how much others believed the cantorial musical path to be a path to purpose and happiness in life, each interviewee still experienced highs and lows before they found their way to musical healing.

"…there was a catharsis in that, which I was mistaking for healing. You know, there's a good amount of relief that comes from letting people know how lost in the dark you are. And that doesn't help you find your way out."[212] There are several therapeutic means by which music and music creation can act as a bandage for a trauma. Part of the desire to create music is for others to feel the emotions the composer is going through. While this sharing of emotion may often feel cathartic, unless one is processing the trauma and the pain, then one often stays in the pit into which they have fallen. Letting people know your darkness does not change your darkness unless they are able to help you out and you are willing to let them help you. "I had to practice telling [friends and family] and practice expanding the circles," said Interviewee 4 about their post-traumatic stress[213] and depression. In their writing of an article,[214] they referenced Mordechai Winkler's response in 1915,[215] in which it was stated that mental health is the equivalent to physical health. This drew attention to the interviewee's mental health, which she used

---

[211] Interviewee 3

[212] Interviewee 2

[213] PTSD – Post-traumatic stress disorder is an anxiety problem that develops in some people after extremely traumatic events, such as combat, crime, an accident or natural disaster. People with PTSD may relive the event via intrusive memories, flashbacks and nightmares; avoid anything that reminds them of the trauma; and have anxious feelings they didn't have before that are so intense their lives are disrupted. – apa.org, *American Psychiatric Association*, adapted from the *Encyclopedia of Psychology*

[214] *My Abortion was a Blessing. As a Rabbi, I will Fight for Others to be able to Make Their Own Sacred Choice.* Interviewee 4, Jta.org, *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, September 3, 2021.

[215] "It means that her mental health is prioritized over the birthing of the child." – Rabbi Mordecai Winkler, *Levushei Mordekhai, Hoshen Mishpat* 39.

as means of "…dipping my toe in the water of people open about [mental health]."[216] This act of expanding one's support network does not give that person the ultimate knowledge or theory behind mental illness and recovery, but it allows for some of the burden to be shared. Because depression is an invisible disability,[217] the outside world often does not see physical signs of pain. This leads to many similar situations as Interviewee 3 encountered, when she described the dissonance between feeling unhappy and appearing "fine." When family, friends, and the general community do not see signs of suicidal ideation or fixation then, much of the time, therapy and a general understanding of depressive self-loathing and demons do not seem like the most necessary help for the subject – since nothing "looks" wrong.

Being unable to see someone's internal pain and struggle certainly does not mean that they are not experiencing those challenges.

> "I'm coming to believe that our bodies and minds are so deeply intertwined that when we feel an emotion…it has to do with my physical health. I feel anxiety in my legs because that's often where I feel anxiety, and in my stomach. It has to do with my physical health, it has to do with my emotional health, it has to do with my mental health. It's all the same."[218]

This revelation specifically takes into account the physical state of Interviewee 4's body when she was a first responder on the scene of a death. In those moments of trauma,[219] the body experiences the adrenaline needed to keep everything together. For Interviewee

---

[216] Interviewee 4

[217] Invisible Disability - "A physical, mental, or neurological condition that is not visible from the outside, yet can limit or challenge a person's movements, senses, or activities." - invisibledisabilities.org.

[218] Interviewee 4

[219] Trauma – Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster. Immediately after the even, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and even physical symptoms like headaches and nausea. While these feelings are normal, some people have difficulty moving on with their lives. – apa.org, *American Psychiatric Association*, adapted from the *Encyclopedia of Psychology*

4, the feeling she had in her body at the time of trauma continues to this day to present itself when she is experiencing other traumatic moments. Thus, the body and the mind are inextricably linked, and simply because others cannot see the physical signs of trauma and depression does not at all mean that there is not physical pain being experienced.

Our lowest lows of depression can often feel as though we are in a state of grief. Grief manifests in the loss of what was, what is, what may never be. "You're not ready to face what you are about to have to face,"[220] and so we grapple with remedies for our pain. Oftentimes these solutions become "spiritual busywork," as coined by Interviewee 2. "It's as though we have that whole checklist of things that you do to get ready for the period of grieving, you know? Here are all the things that you have to do to prepare for *shiva*."[221][222] Depression can feel like a *shiva* for the happiness of one's soul. After we have done what we need to do for the *shiva*, we sit and live in grief. With respect to the clergy interviewees, music became the language used to express this depression, this period of *shiva*, and morphed into a method to help crawl out of the depths of anguish. "The music was helping me organize my spiritual feelings, and therapy was helping me organize my emotions and my thoughts…and music, being a daily practice and a continual practice, has really helped me to be in better touch with myself and in better communication with myself."[223]

---

[220] Interviewee 2
[221] Ibid
[222] *Shiva* – A traditional seven-day period of mourning the death of a family member that is observed in Jewish homes. Shiva practice origin from the Talmud (*Sanhedrin 108b*).
[223] Interviewee 2

Anxiety[224]

As with depression and other mental illnesses, when it comes to anxiety we see a similar body-mind connection.[225] The physical and the emotional work in tandem, and when one is suffering the other suffers. In exploring this body-mind association through the lens of anxiety, we see that the body has a way of protecting us so that we do not feel so emotional when the mind cannot handle what the body must handle. In moments of anxiety and chaos, our bodies keep us from feeling the highest of highs and the lowest of lows. And while it is natural to want to feel those highs, feeling the highs can hurt more when one is already spiraling. "It was this really weird, out-of-body experience where my brain was telling me that I should be feeling emotional and I should be feeling happy and I should be having all of the feelings, but I couldn't feel anything," said Interviewee 8 regarding a musical event, which usually would have sparked intense joy. In this time of distress for Interviewee 8, her body was telling her that she was not yet in a place to fully embrace the happiness she would have usually experienced. Her capacity was not yet enough to mentally support all that she had gone through and was continuing to understand for herself. Had her body allowed her to feel the highest of highs, there would have been an overwhelming feeling of all emotions, which would set back any healing progress made.

---

[224] Anxiety – Anxiety is an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes increased by blood pressure. People with anxiety disorders usually have recurring intrusive thoughts or concerns. They may avoid certain situations out of worry. They may also have physical symptoms such as sweating, trembling, dizziness or a rapid heartbeat. – apa.org, *American Psychiatric Association*, adapted from the *Encyclopedia of Psychology.*

[225] Body-mind connection - "The belief that causes, developments, and outcomes of a physical illness are determined by the interaction of psychological, social factors, and biological factors." - johnshopkinssolutions.com.

For someone with anxiety, someone who is in a constant state of angst and apprehension, and someone who feels a connection to music, that music can either rile them up or calm them down. In Interviewee 6's depiction of her with anxiety, she was conscious of the role music played and continues to play in helping to find a state of calm. As life has changed and Interviewee 6 has aged and matured, music has continued to help create a safe space, both internally and externally. This is one of the reasons Interviewee 6 felt called to the cantorate – because the experience of music was calming no matter what else was happening. That calm was soothing for the interviewee, and she knew that she could use that calm to help soothe her congregants and others.

Listening to Music as Healing

It became very clear throughout the interview process that many of the interviewees differentiated between singing music and listening to music. For some, listening to music became a way to outwardly express emotion when they could not yet find the words. It helped these interviewees to understand what they were feeling without talking about it and often informed them about how they were feeling simply by the style or genre they were listening to. Listening was frequently the first step, similar to that of accepting the diagnosis of mental health and illness. The first step of healing is often recognizing what one is going through as well as being able to name the challenge before then asking for help.

"I have vivid recollections of sitting in the chapel and hearing someone playing that [Dan Nichols' *Asher Yatzar*][226][227] and singing the words and having the tears just run down. Like just feeling so deeply. This idea of, 'I know that nothing's wrong with me, but like, I feel broken.'"[228] Interviewee 7 expressed the raw emotions that pour out when using music as a vehicle for understanding one's emotional self. The English words to Dan Nichols' *Asher Yatzar* are: "I thank you for my life, body and soul. Help me realize I am beautiful and whole. I'm perfect the way I am and a little broken, too. I will live each day as a gift I give to you." Particularly with a piece that is about the body-mind connection, one is bound to sit in the emotions felt when one feels their body, their mind, or perhaps both are not working "properly." Hearing someone else's words reflecting the truth one feels about oneself is both the beauty and the pain of music. The experience creates space for a catharsis, even if the cathartic moment itself feels overwhelming and anxiety-inducing.

Yet when searching for music to listen to while in the depths of pain the interviewees had a variety of reactions. "I could not find something I wanted to listen to…nothing, no musical choice felt right."[229] Interviewee 7 has very eclectic musical taste and found no selection and no genre that was able to make her feel comforted in her particular anxious moment. "It was a barometer for me that I didn't feel like myself – that

---

[226] *Asher Yatzar* – weekday and Shabbat morning liturgy (*Birchot HaShachar*), "Blessed are You, Adonai, or God, sovereign of the universe, who formed humans with wisdom and created within him many openings and many hollows. It is obvious and known in the presence of Your glorious throne that if one of them were ruptured, or if one of them were blocked, it would be impossible to exist and stand in Your Presence even for a short while. Blessed are You, Adonai, Who heals all flesh and performs wonders." Trans. *Sefaria*.

[227] Nichols, Dan. *Asher Yatzar*. 2016, dannicholsmusic.com.

[228] Interviewee 7

[229] Ibid

something was fundamentally wrong."[230] When music does not serve as a catharsis, music or a musical genre can feel like it is tying one to emotions that one does not want to experience. That musical reflection of one's mindset is not always the reflection one desires. However, forcing oneself to listen to something that will change one's emotional trajectory is not always healthy or viable. There are times when pushing oneself out of one's comfort zone is necessary to take the next step forward, and there are times when stepping out of one's comfort zone is overwhelming and detrimental.

Conversely, when someone is experiencing emotional distress, it is common to fixate on anything that will make them feel less distressed. "I tend to sort of latch onto one piece of music, and then I listen to it like over and over and over and over and over again," shared Interviewee 6. "…sort of like ruminating," as though the mind needs something to grasp onto and focus on instead of the mental health process. She explained this aspect of anxiety as if it were "a function of the mild OCD[231] that I have,"[232] since specific musical pieces would play "on loop in my brain." Venturing out of the Jewish musical realm, Interviewee 6 found Bo Burnham's secular comedy special[233] to be a source of fascination. The ability to fixate on one piece, one artist, and one album allowed for pause on all the other anxiety-inducing pieces of life. Yet for Interviewee 6, this fascination turned into a series of wonderings: "I can't believe you came up with all this. I can't believe you did this. I want to understand his creative process." The need to understand and immerse oneself in another person's skill – a skill that maybe one does

---

[230] ibid
[231] Obsessive Compulsive Disorder - extreme high levels of repetitive thoughts or behaviors.
[232] Interviewee 6
[233] Burnham, Bo. *Inside*. Netflix, 2021.

not have for oneself – can be a source of creativity and health if used in a positive way to help a person's growth. However, this fixation on another person's skills can also manifest in more anxiety. Interviewee 6 attached herself to the latter and became obsessed with questioning the artistic piece to a point where the album no longer helped her move forward, but instead took up too much of her time and brainpower.

In a similar way that being "obsessed" with a piece of music can be healing, "Music can have that visceral reaction and can send me to that place."[234] Interviewee 6 spoke about the way music can transport us back to moments in our lives. An entire piece, or even just an interval can cause tears to fall or send us to moments of childhood memories or times when we were in need of comfort. Particularly for cantors, when specific pieces of music are staples of community worship or special because they were commissioned for the community or for someone of status within the community, they hold a special place in one's heart and can serve as a reminder of a time that no other piece of music can touch. Simon Sargon's Children's Service[235] was a musical composition that was commissioned for the synagogue Interviewee 6 attended as a small child, and every time she hears these pieces of music, she is reminded of her involvement in the children's choir at her childhood congregation. Positive or negative, music has a hold on our memories.

For clergy people, it is sensible to find connections to Jewish pieces of music and liturgy when in moments of distress and challenging mental health. As one evolves, recovers, and heals from the traumas experienced, it is still possible that the Jewish links

---

[234] Interviewee 6

[235] Sargon, Simon. *Sing His Praise: A Friday Evening Service for Youth Choir*. Transcontinental Music Publications, 1981.

to the traumas will be evocative of old pain. When hearing the musical group Sheva's[236] composition of Psalm 121,[237] Interviewee 4 still takes "some deep breaths." This is in reaction to a traumatic life or death experience that led Interviewee 4 to fixate on the words of *Esa Einai*[238] for a long period of time until she was certain that everyone in her vicinity was safe. Hearing the melody of Sheva's Psalm 121 still triggers Interviewee 4's to relive the trauma and emotions felt in that horrific moment. Throughout the years Interviewee 4 proved that the initial reaction to an evocative piece of music or sound could not always be controlled but that how one learns to manage the next step of the reaction can be controlled. "It's interesting that the piece can both be in some ways comforting and also could be in some ways triggering."[239]

Singing Music as Healing

One of the ways that our bodies and minds express themselves is through our voices. "*Kara v'garon"*– Cry out with a full-throat![240] "*Roni akarah lo yaladah pitzchi rina v'tzahali lo challah"*– "Sing, O barren, thou that didst not bear, break forth into singing and cry aloud, thou that didst not travail."[241] "*Ivdu et Adonai b'simcha; bo'u l'fanav birnanah"* – "Serve the Lord with gladness; come before His presence with

[236] Sheva – 1997 world music ensemble made up of seven musicians of Muslim and Jewish backgrounds, founded by musician Moshe Ben Ari.
[237] Psalm 121 – "A song of ascents. I turn my eyes to the mountains; from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth. He will not let your foot give way; your guardian will not slumber; See, the guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps! The Lord is your guardian, the Lord is your protection at your right hand. By day the sun will not strike you, nor the moon by night. The Lord will guard you from all harm; He will guard your life. The Lord will guard your going and coming now and forever." Trans. *JPS.*
[238] Psalm 121, trans. *JPS.*
[239] Interviewee 4
[240] Isaiah 58:1, trans. *JPS.*
[241] Isaiah 54:1, trans. *JPS.*

singing."[242] The *Tanach*[243] teaches that singing should occur in all moments of emotion and change. Two of the most famous examples of singing during moments of change are *Shirat HaYam,*[244] when Moses and the Israelites left Egypt and crossed the Sea of Reeds, and *Ha'azinu*,[245] when Moses gives his final address to the Israelites in the form of song. The voice is a necessary component of these emotional peaks and valleys. When one experiences physical changes, the voice shifts to make space for that change of physicality. When one feels vulnerable, the voice can soften or even crack. When one is comfortable, one speaks so that everyone can hear. People breathe deeper when they feel like themselves. One breathes shallow breaths when they feel hurt, nervous, or anxious. Voices are a conduit for the outside world to understand what is happening emotionally. Singing is not only a powerful cathartic tool; it also can make one physically aware of what is happening inside before one can intellectually comprehend their emotions.

"I realized that part of the reason why the music was not moving me, why nothing was doing it for me is because my body was not letting me feel the trauma that I was going through."[246] Interviewee 8 spoke to the boundaries that her body put up in order to protect her psyche while singing. While serving at a pulpit and struggling to find joy, instead of her body allowing for the hurt and upset to flow from her voice, her body protected her emotionally by "telling" her voice not to strain or use vocal technique in any way that would be exhausting. This detachment led to friends' and family members' concern about the well-being of their loved one. Because of the mind-body connection,

---

[242] Psalm 100:2, trans. *JPS.*
[243] The Hebrew Bible, including the writings of the *Torah*, the *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and *Ketuvim* (Writings).
[244] *Shirat HaYam* (known in English as The Song of the Sea): Exodus 15:1-19.
[245] *Ha'azinu* ("Listen"): Deuteronomy 32:1-52.
[246] Interviewee 8

Interviewee 8 was able to protect her emotional capacity, and that of those who did not know her well enough to be concerned, by leaning into the lack of vocal musicality and enjoyment. This perspective was shifted when Interviewee 8 moved to a better fitting community that was more able to support her in recovering from previous physical and emotional trauma. With this support, she was able to feel like herself again and realize "…not only the beauty of the moment but realizing that the music that was happening was kind of allowing me to heal from the trauma[247]" that she had experienced.

Isaiah 54:1[248] teaches that the voice may be used to express moments of traumatic loss. "The most powerful moment was having the experience of something expressed that I didn't feel could be expressed."[249] For Interviewee 1, singing and using her voice served not only as a catharsis for herself but also as an outward expression and narrative of a personal experience without having to share deep and traumatic details of her life. "The congregation understood that there was something happening through the way I would express myself in music."[250] The mind has an unintentional way of connecting with the voice and expressing emotions through the body. Even in moments when one may think that they are covering up the sadness with the expression of joy in one's voice, a congregation that has gotten to know a person, even if just for a little while, may be able to tell when joy is put on as a cover for challenging emotions. Reflecting back, Interviewee 1 noted the moments when congregants would point out, "You were so sad," and other such comments about Interviewee 1's emotional and vocal state. "…but then,

---

[247] ibid

[248] Isaiah 54:1 – "Shout, O barren one, You who bore no child! Shout aloud for joy, You who did not travail! For the children of the wife forlorn shall outnumber those of the espoused – said the Lord." Trans. *JPS.*

[249] Interviewee 1

[250] Interviewee 1

as there were positive changes, they would say things like, 'positive changes were manifesting in your voice.'"[251]

Aside from the outward understanding of one's vocal abilities during moments of mental health crises, singing can serve as a "place to talk to God."[252] There is singing as communal prayer and focusing on others while having a place to search for healing and be seen together, and there is also the opportunity for the prayer leader to sing for their own self. For the former to be effective, space must be made for the latter. A spiritual leader's quest for communication with God is essential so that one can fill oneself "…because the work is so demanding."[253] "Singing can be an honest reflection of God,"[254] a way to let God hear the plea and confusion without having to express those emotions through words. This honesty requires singers to be open and vulnerable, without censoring themselves, so that the communication with God is as true as can be. Singing releases what listening cannot. Singing allows for a "holy experience"[255] of the body and mind working together with God.

Another notion noted in conversations with interviewees was the desire to separate performance singing from prayer leading singing. Almost all the interviewees shared that they felt their bodies were most connected to their breath when "singing in a capacity of leading services."[256] The nerves disappeared, and the singing became about those who were being led in prayer as opposed to the technical concerns that occur when

---

[251] ibid
[252] ibid
[253] ibid
[254] ibid
[255] Interviewee 7
[256] ibid

singing for a concert or recital. The stage and the bimah are viewed as two entirely different vehicles for musical connection. Regardless of the love for being on the stage, the anxiety and tendency to get "scared of being put on the spot and messing up,"[257] was a universal feeling among the clergy interviewed. "Calm and a sort of connectedness to the music"[258] was felt most on the bimah. Music being sung on the *bimah*[259] is prayer, and in prayer every emotion is felt and welcomed. This idea will be explored more in the section entitled, "Prayer Music as Healing."

Singing can be just as powerful, if not more so, when done as a communal activity. The harmonies and sounds of multiple voices can be a reminder that we do not live in this world alone, nor do we go through trials and tribulations in solitude. Interviewee 4 relived the seclusion she experienced when "… [I sang] Psalm 121 over and over again for the rest of the summer." Even though it was important to process the traumatic event as an individual, processing this trauma with everyone else who was part of that trauma proved to be equally important. A summer camp was the scene of Interviewee 4's traumatic experience; thus, all the campers were involved in the distress as well as were those responding on the scene of the incident. As the summer continued, one of the ways that the community healed together was through song. Interviewee 4 and other camp counselors made a mash-up of *Hashkiveinu*[260] and "Little Talks" by Of Monsters and Men[261] and recorded it as a summer anthem. The apropos lyrics of "Little Talks" – "'Cuz the truth may vary; this ship will carry our bodies safe to shore" – and the

[257] Interviewee 6
[258] ibid
[259] *Bimah* - podium, platform, altar in a synagogue or sanctuary.
[260] *Hashkiveinu* - A prayer recited during the evening liturgy asking God for protection during the nighttime.
[261] Of Monsters and Men - An indie/folk rock band formed in 2010.

harmonies of the campers created a song that "…itself became a fixture"[262] for the camp and the community as they processed the distressing experience together. Sometimes that distress, fear, and anguish brings a community together in ways never thought possible. "Fear and joy and hope: Judaism embodies all of that."[263] Rabbi Nachman of Breslov said, "*kol haolam kulo gesher tzar m'od v'hayikar lo l'facheid klal,"*[264] meaning, "the whole world is a very narrow bridge, and the main thing is to have no fear at all." While Interviewee 3 agrees with Rabbi Nachman's assessment, her analysis of the text reads more nuanced than many of our translations. "It is not like there can't be fear, and it's not that there won't be difficult chasms and valleys to overcome, but you just have to go. You have to take the next step."[265] Singing together with a community has the capacity to help heal the community as a whole as well as the individuals who make up the community.

Composing Music as Healing

Like singing and listening, composing music can be a "…source of healing, and an opportunity to have a dialogue with God."[266] Several of the interviewees were either accomplished composers or had composed music for themselves and their communities. All of the interviewed composers agreed that musical compositions need time and space to live and settle into what the composer needs to hear in the moment of composition. "So often during times of strife these most powerful songs are written. It's hard to write

[262] Interviewee 4
[263] Interviewee 3
[264] Words of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810).
[265] Interviewee 3
[266] Interviewee 5

when everything's perfect and rosy and everything's flowing easily in your life. You know, most songs are born out of heartache, it seems."[267] Interviewee 5 described the process of writing a piece of music over a long period of time:

> "I just don't know what to do with it, but the part I had written was sticky, and it just kept coming back over the years. And I put it aside, and it was during the pandemic that the song came fully formed and it was my way of bringing light and healing to my experience, to our experience. The song is called 'Be the Light'[268] and it was the message I needed to hear."

Interviewee 5 trusted that what she had begun to create in song would take shape when she felt more of a calling for it to be released into the world. When Covid-19 pandemic hit and she was dealing with individual strife and anxiety, as well as the strife and anxiety of her congregants, the music and lyrics to "Be the Light" became a source of healing and help. Composers dwell on the importance of keeping the music coming from an authentic place. One can always make oneself sit down and write, but writing for the sake of writing, and writing to impact change, are two different things. There was a common trope of, "If I want to be creative, I can't be. It usually is something that sort of comes over me."[269] Becoming fixated on a melody that continues to come into one's head is very different than sitting down and saying, "I want to write a piece of music. The outcome will be different and possibly not as meaningful."[270] Perhaps it should also be noted that all of these composers chose a life in the cantorate. They may write both Jewish and secular music, but they are doing so while being ordained members of the clergy. There is something meaningful that comes out of compositions created by people

---

[267] ibid
[268] Young, Cantor Natalie. *Be the Light*. 19 Nov. 2020, www.natalieyoungmusic.com/videoslisten.html.
[269] Interviewee 6
[270] Interviewee 8

who feel like their musical journeys have been "…accompanied by a deeply spiritual journey where I was able to tap into something greater than myself."[271]

While Interviewee 5 wrote her "Be the Light" piece for her own wellbeing and transformation, she also "…want[s] to be able to give that to other people" if there is a chance that her music may transform others as well. "You never know what happens to your music when you put it out into the universe. Sometimes it just goes away and other times it grows legs, and you don't even know how it grows legs."[272] Part of writing music is being able to let that music take flight and land where one may not expect it to land. Composers write for themselves knowing that others have walked through similar experiences before and may resonate with the exact inspiration for creating a piece. Others may feel deeply moved by a composition in ways not intended by the composer. Music has the ability to take on a life of its own. Once shared, music is set free, and composers do not know where it will land, and other times, composers share their music with people and watch the impact that composition has on the listeners. After a traumatic event and a long period of deep depression, Interviewee 2 composed a *niggun*,[273] which hauntingly expressed feelings in the aftermath of his distress. This piece was not initially intended to be a piece put out into the world; however, a year or so later, the *niggun* became one of the musical pieces used to craft a *t'filah*[274] moment in the Interviewee's community.

> "Actually, having people sing it, not knowing [I wrote it] made it even stronger for me, I think. I think when people heard it, they could hear that it was like a painful melody. But I don't think anybody would ever guess that it was my pain

[271] Interviewee 3
[272] Interviewee 5
[273] *Niggun* - a wordless song.
[274] *T'filah* - Jewish prayer services.

> that I was singing necessarily – and I think people did sing. It was a hug that I wasn't ready to accept. Like, I couldn't accept actual hugs then. The hypervigilance was making it so that I couldn't even touch my friends at the time. But hearing people sing the melody that had, you know, started not yet bringing me comfort at that point but was putting my pain in perspective…yeah, having people share in that felt almost like they knew."[275]

Releasing anything personal into the world can be scary and anxiety-inducing. Releasing a piece of music written in response to personal trauma and baring the composer's soul is no less unnerving. However, finding the courage to release a piece into the world provides an opportunity for others to react to the piece and, perhaps, find solace. Seeing and feeling the reactions of others can give the composer a new perspective on the piece as they watch how the music has taken on a life of its own.

As Interviewee 5 mentioned above, music is often born out of moments of deepest emotion. This means that many musical pieces are written by a composer as catharsis. After his intense traumatic experience, Interviewee 2 was caught between not feeling able to write and needing to write as "…a talisman that I could carry." "I wrote anything that felt like screaming, and I remember bringing it to the public quite a bit after I needed it for myself."[276] In its conception, it did not matter how the public received the piece. The most important aspect of the music was the personal connection made and the healing found from being able to put feelings into a tune. Interviewee 2 recalled that his listeners inquired why his piece had been written so high, "…wailing on a G for four measures because it was a little bit of a siren," since to others the high intensity felt excessive. Yet for Interviewee 2, the purpose of the piece was to "…fill the space with vibrations to sort of shake everything back into place." There was a fearful feeling of having attracted evil,

[275] Interviewee 2
[276] Interviewee 2

and the vibrating sensation was Interviewee 2's way of pushing the negativity and demons far from him.

The poem "Footsteps"[277] was the inspiration for Interviewee 5's piece, "Carry Me."[278] This song and process of its composition "…allowed me to feel carried in that moment, and it brought me back to a place of being able to function again," mentioned Interviewee 5. This compositional process, which paralleled a haunting personal moment, helped solidify for her the deep connection that music had to her faith and to God. When she needed to be carried, she literally wrote: "Give me strength, God. I need it like those footsteps on the sand. Carry me." When she needed healing, she wrote for herself a manifestation of God, with whom to go through the pain, "…so that whatever it is I'm going through, I'm not alone going through it."[279]

While composing music is a way to move forward, there can be a feeling of dishonesty and disloyalty when one begins to recover, heal, and move beyond the depths of depression. "There was a certain amount of not wanting to feel well because if you felt better, it was like you were betraying the gravity of what made you feel that way."[280] When one receives a mental health diagnosis, that diagnosis can become a stronghold and a definition of who that person is. Making the diagnosis part of one's identity does not allow for one to heal and move forward into recovery. Therefore, getting "better" becomes a challenging dichotomy. When creating music for healing, Interviewee 2 ruminated on the question, "Does getting better mean that this doesn't matter anymore?"

[277] Anonymous. *Footsteps*. 1960.
[278] Young, Cantor Natalie. *Carry Me*. 9 Nov. 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=57J4b7XSees.
[279] Interviewee 5
[280] Interviewee 2

This brings to light the definition of "recovery."[281] Each individual has their own, personal definition of recovery regardless of the dictionary and medical descriptions. For some, recovery means that one is beyond the challenges and no longer feels associated with depression or other mental health crises. Others might consider themselves as "always in recovery" but have learned the skills necessary to manage their mental health in more productive ways. "It's not like I sang depression away. It's still there. It's just how I manage it."[282] In this particular case, composing music was a significant way of managing depression so that it did not control the entirety of the composer's life. Using composition as a means of release can be a powerful and effective way to share and unleash some of the burdens one might be feeling from the depressive state.

Writing music can feel like recovery and healing – one can only write when one is ready to write. "I always have this fear that my creative well has dried up and I have to be able to surrender, not have a plan, not push to create something, but just to sit with what you're feeling, to sit with your music and just let it flow."[283] The fear of becoming creatively barren affects many artists. As was noted by several interviewees, to force a piece of art is not always the answer to creating the most meaningful art piece. Sometimes this means waiting through the dried up well of creativity until one is inspired or feels moved to write again no matter when that might occur – especially if one is in a state of emotional distress. "The original melody came to me on the train, and if you're not notating it you have to sing it the entire time until you get off the train so you can

[281] Recovery - a return to a "normal" state of health, mind, or strength.
[282] Interviewee 2
[283] Interviewee 5

record it."[284] Music works best when it is created out of honesty and authenticity. Music works best when composers allow themselves to grow and change while keeping "…that thread of me."[285] When artists put aside the formality of where and when to write music, then there can be the unspoken question of, "This is happening to me and it might be happening to you too, and like, can we connect through song?"[286] Composing pieces that speak to the realities of life and wellbeing can have a deep and healing impact on the composer as well as on their listeners.

Prayer Music as Healing

Music as prayer is central to the lives and livelihood of clergy. For clergy, it is important for them to help others feel seen and connected to a community, while also helping themselves heal. Music helps allow for clergy to relate individually and communally.

It is a beautiful thing to feel "…grabbed by the heart by Jewish music,"[287] especially when in crisis. The music expands the space to feel hurt and broken and to recognize that one is not alone. Particularly when a clergy person feels in need of healing it can be challenging to "…wish other people healing when I didn't feel whole."[288] When one does not have the words, or even the strength, to express for oneself how they feel, then the cantorate and the rabbinate become more of a "job" – a transactional occupation – rather than a "calling." In this "job" mode, the ability to feel deeply and to connect

[284] Interviewee 2
[285] Interviewee 5
[286] Interviewee 3
[287] Interviewee 1
[288] Interviewee 7

personally is diminished, suggesting again that the body protects the mind and soul when the two are unable to communicate with one another. As people responsible for fostering a judgment-free environment for the healing of others, healing oneself becomes even more of a priority. The musical and cantorial world helped the interviewees in personal healing more than any other genre of music by helping each person to find Jewish and spiritual purpose. "I'd written music for years, I performed music for years, but I had never felt that there was a purpose. And I remember feeling like for the first time that what I was singing was important."[289] The first aspect of this purpose is feeling seen by a community. The second is being welcomed into the community without hesitation. The third aspect is feeling like this music can help change the course of someone's mental health trajectory for the better.

Interviewee 2 described the sensation of first being seen by a group of people who recognized his voice would be powerful in prayer music:

> "Someone heard me sing in the pews and asked me to join the choir [at my synagogue]. It was super scary. I'd never done anything like that. So, I showed up at the JCC[290] because we had a rolling choir every Tuesday evening from 6:00 to 7:00. You can come in and learn just songs, and the way the choir was set up was we were basically harmonizers and backup, and sometimes we'd sing solos with the cantor. It was very casual, you know, regular congregational music that we were doing. And I just remember feeling like for the first time that what I was singing was important. Ken Chasen's *Tov L'hodot*[291], you know, and the first time the cantor yelled out to me, 'Why don't you take the harmony?' And then doing it – it was the first glimpse of doing something that made sense with who I am."

This story, along with so many others, is an example of the positive impact that recognizing a person's skills and abilities can have on their lives. For Interviewee 2,

---

[289] Interviewee 2

[290] JCC - Jewish Community Center.

[291] *Tov L'hodot* - Psalm 92:2-3: "It is a good thing to give thanks unto God, and to sing praises unto God's name. To proclaim your lovingkindness in the morning and your faithfulness in the night." Trans. *JPS.*

music was the gateway to feeling seen and heard, not only by a respected person in the community, but also by a community that might have had similar emotional distress as the interviewee. Neither the Hebrew phrase being sung, nor the complexity of the harmonies was important to Interviewee 2. What was important was the feeling of accessing purpose and community through a Jewish lens.

Once music has helped the individual find purpose in the moment, the next step is to use music to find purpose within a community and to use that meaning to create lifelong relationships with music and others. Interviewee 3 explains the impact that being welcomed into a singing community had on her mental health:

> "When I made the shift to the cantorial world, it was like – no – come sing together. Like, let's come experience this as a community. And it was about the 'we,' and not just about me. And so, music then became a vehicle for a catharsis. It was like when I sing, I'm allowing my breath to flow more evenly, and that's informing my endorphins and that's informing the serotonin and like I just was, 'oh!' I'm like calmer."

Becoming about the "we" instead of solely about the "me" is paramount to feeling that life has a purpose. Knowing that a community is supporting you, surrounding you, and excited about you helps to take the emotional burden off oneself and share it with others. Feeling that others are available helps one to recognize that being in community, particularly a singing community, has the power to heal.

Clergy, as *klei kodesh,*[292] can take healing one step further and find connection with God. "When there's a purpose bigger than myself…when I'm leading prayer and I'm on the bimah singing a prayer, I am able to see there is a relationship between myself and the community and the words that I'm singing and God."[293] Prayer for the *shliach*

[292] *Klei Kodesh* - "Holy vessels."
[293] Interviewee 6

tzibbur[294] becomes about "…asking to be emptied so that we can be a vessel and a vehicle for light and God."[295] If we do not have the capacity to comfort and emotionally support one another then, as previously described, the role becomes merely a job. "The role of the cantor is like when you lose hold [of a comforting space and emotional support], like I'm holding it for you,"[296] and one can only emotionally support others if they are able to support and comfort themselves. Creating an environment for others to heal and to use music to heal is a privilege. *Mi Shebeirach* is the most common prayer for healing used in Jewish liturgical services. While recited regularly, with more individual growth and understanding of healing of the body, mind, and spirit, "…it feels like a privilege to be able to offer it [*Mi Shebeirach*] to other people."[297] Being *klei kodesh* means finding the strength within ourselves to support and comfort all who need it.

Music and the Congregation

An important part of the clergy role is connecting with a synagogue and its members and moving that community forward in covenantal relationships. These sacred connections can hold each person through a wide gamut of emotional needs and desires. An effective way for a community to heal, whether as a collective or individually, is through music.

"When we are able to expose those parts of ourselves in a way that feels accessible, then others will speak up," shared Interviewee 3 about the effect of

[294] *Shliach Tzibur* - A person who leads the congregation in prayers.
[295] Interviewee 1
[296] Interviewee 3
[297] Interviewee 7

vulnerability when acting as a pastoring clergy person. Working in spaces where one is entirely exposed to the congregation can be both scary and powerful in allowing congregants to see the true struggles in the clergy's lives. "When I'm real, it gives other people permission to be real," agrees Interviewee 1. All of the interviewees noted that there is a balance among what to give away, how to reserve one's experiences for oneself, and how to use lessons from one's own experiences to help a congregant through their own journey. How to share appropriately is always a challenge for clergy since there is no definitive answer. Each clergy person must decipher what they feel is the right balance. Yet, "The most important thing to do is to listen and be present."[298] Particularly if the clergy person has dealt with depths and demons before, the desire to empathize, repeat back what is being heard, and say "I see you, and you're not alone in this,"[299] can be powerful.

One way Interviewee 6 has exhibited this empathy through music has been by creating personalized congregant playlists. When a youth of the synagogue went to the cantor and expressed anxiety which had been causing the child paralyzing insomnia, Interviewee 6 created a playlist of prayers and different settings of these prayers for the child to listen to before bed to help her calm down. The recordings, coupled with sitting alongside the cantor and learning about the prayer, sparked a love for Jewish music and Jewish life that might not have occurred had the child not felt comfortable sharing their emotional distress with the cantor. This comfort came from years of cultivating sacred

[298] Interviewee 3
[299] ibid

relationships with congregants as well as being open and vulnerable in front of the community.

A similar circumstance occurred with an older female congregant who had been ill with a mental health diagnosis and bedridden for a long while. She wrote to Interviewee 6 to say that the services and the music were still comforting to her, and she asked where she could listen to the music on days that were not Shabbat. Interviewee 6 made this congregant a YouTube playlist of standard synagogue Shabbat music as well as other calming liturgical music. Perhaps this form of musical healing did not lead to recovery, but for these congregants, the cantor's willingness to see each of them, recognize their pain, and find a way for them to be helped in a Jewish context was meaningful to both the congregant and the clergy.

Interviewee 2 pointed out that there is a challenge inherent in bringing so much of oneself and one's own musical expression to the congregation, since not everyone might connect and find healing with the same style of music. "My worry is that it's, you know, it's prayer. But it's also the prayer with me barging into the room."[300] There is an inherent challenge to being open about the musical choices that fuel the clergy person's healing. It would be unrealistic for everyone in the congregation to feel connected to the same style of music, the same composition, or even the same piece of liturgy. Sometimes the best a clergy person can do is to musically express empathy as well as gratitude. If the community knows that the clergy person is grateful for the experience to be together in prayer and that they are open and honest with who they are, then individual congregants are more likely to embrace musical stylings that they might not connect with the most.

[300] Interviewee 2

Connection with music is a spectrum. Many synagogues have created opportunities for discussing and supporting congregants with mental health challenges. One example is a communal healing service called "Soul Spark Shabbat," created by a synagogue in South Orange County, California. This congregation came together to reimagine Shabbat services as a way to help heal the community from the traumatic events of 2020-2022. They reinvented their Shabbat service by shifting the spatial setup and adding cello and percussion so that the music becomes more meditative and chant-like than at other Shabbat services at this California synagogue. "Soul Spark Shabbat" is the brainchild of Interviewee 5 and their congregation. She and her community do not use Shabbat liturgy but instead take specific themes for people to meditate on and then create a service around those themes. Interviewee 5 described the intention of this service as finding the "communal heartbeat."

> "The energy that's created between people so that no matter what heart of headspace you're in, we get to raise the ship together…You have some people that come in with really high energy, other people who have really low energy, and when you make music together all of a sudden the whole community comes together, and it's a very powerful experience to know that you are part of creating a sacred space." – Interviewee 5

Interviewee 5 and her lay leadership appreciated that the transformation "…is not on one person. It's not only the clergy to transform you, right? It's all of us as community members."[301] The idea of "Soul Spark Shabbat" came about from the Covid19 pandemic[302] when Interviewee 5 and their lay leadership realized that there was a significant part of their community that "…craved somebody cracking them open."

---

[301] Interviewee 5

[302] Pandemic 2020 - COVID-19 was declared a pandemic in March of 2020 by the World Health Organization.

Interviewee 5 and their leadership then created a Shabbat experience where they could "…make space for all of the different ways that people do that [heal]"[303] by sharing their strengths, their talents, and their passions, and connecting with everyone sitting around them. This is just one of the many recent examples of a prayer experience that allowed people to help carry the burdens of their fellow congregants, so that their fellows' pain and fears were not so isolating. When clergy people make it a priority to see their congregants in all their emotions, then the congregants can lean upon this model to be vulnerable with each other and feel less alone. In the words of Interviewee 5: "And even when we go into the wilderness, when you have people by your side to do that with, it's less debilitating, less scary and there's more hope."

[303] Interviewee 5

Conclusion

In the Introduction, I spoke about my personal connection with mental illness and how my relationship with music aided in my recovery and healing. Through research and study of mental health in Judaism, it became abundantly clear how music has played a fundamental role in the healing of the Jewish people throughout time. The writers of the *Tanach* infused mental illness and crises into the narratives of biblical figures we read about on a yearly, if not daily, basis. The psalms are full of existential questions and torment about being alive. Composers have written musical settings of liturgical texts that express the emotional depth and complexity that is needed to help heal as one moves through a mental health journey. Examples of mental health in Jewish contexts can be found in the writings of the sages and rabbis who crafted our sacred traditions. As the Jewish people have grown and evolved, so have the ways in which the Jewish community, and society at large, have reacted to and cared for those struggling with mental illness. Clergy people are beginning to speak about their own experiences with mental health and mental illness in the hopes of opening the conversation to their communities. As Arnold Eisen,[304] PhD, chancellor the Jewish Theological Seminary[305] from 2007-2020, wrote in his article "Choose Life: American Jews and Quest for Healing":

> "The problem of the Jewish people: The group, the community, and its institutions, received all our attention. The individual and his problems were ignored… We thought about community, we forgot about the person. The time has arrived to pay heed to the forgotten individual. Judaism is a personal problem… I mean a relatedness to the center of one's being… [to the] vital

[304] Arnold Eisen – (1951 –) Past Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary.
[305] Jewish Theological Seminary – A Conservative Jewish seminary in Manhattan, New York.

> personal question which every human being is called upon to answer, day in, day out. What shall I do with my mind, my wealth, my power?"[306]

Eisen recognized that Jewish communities were actually neglecting to look at community members as individuals, and that this oversight would ultimately hinder the spiritual growth and well-being of both individual and community. Following are examples of ways that contemporary synagogues and communities are dealing with mental illness in their communities.

The Jewish Healing Movement

The contemporary Jewish Healing Movement was founded in the early 1990s "to expand the normative definitions of Jewish practice to include providing spiritual resources for Jews facing serious illness and their families and caregivers."[307] Three rabbis (Rachel Cowan, Nancy Flam, and Susan Friedman), a breast cancer survivor (Ellen Hermanson), and a novelist (Nessa Rapoport) came together and formed a movement that helped to create rituals, healing services, and support groups for those in need of healing, both physical and emotional. From "working with the spirituality of brokenness,"[308] Cowan and Flam later broke off to co-found the Institute for Jewish Spirituality,[309] and Rabbi Amy Eilberg, along with Flam, created the Bay Area Jewish

---

[306] Eisen, Arnold. "Choose Life: American Jews and the Quest for Healing." *Healing and the Jewish Imagination: Spiritual and Practical Perspectives on Judaism and Health*, edited by Rabbi William Cutter, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2007, pp. 16.
[307] "Rachel Cowan." *Jewish Women's Archive*, jwa.org/feminism/cowan-rachel.
[308] ibid
[309] Institute for Jewish Spirituality – Founded in 1999 IJS is a program developed to teach Jewish spiritual practices and mindfulness.

Healing Center,[310] and co-created the Yedidya Center for Jewish Spiritual Direction.[311] Rabbi Rachel Cowan explained intention for the Jewish Healing Movement:

> "Jews are discovering that they can turn to Judaism for rituals and practices, developed over the centuries, which help them find strength and maintain hope. The Jewish Healing Movement involves rabbis, chaplains, and medical caregivers who connect Jews with these practices. They work also to revise and renew these rituals, liturgies, and texts to give them a voice the modern Jew can hear."[312]

From out of the Jewish Healing Movement have come many other healing centers across the United States. These include the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center, the New York Jewish Healing Center, Jewish Healing Center Los Angeles, and the National Center for Jewish Healing.

The Kalsman Institute, founded by Rabbi William Cutter, works to help people "at the intersection of Judaism and Health with a focus on spiritual care and healing."[313] Since the Kalsman Institute is located on Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion's Los Angeles campus, it is able to provide pastoral education for future Reform leaders. The Kalsman Institute has produced three books on Judaism and health and well-being, two of which are quoted in this thesis.

---

[310] Bay Area Jewish Healing Center – Located in San Francisco, the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center provides Jewish spiritual care for those living with illness or caring for those who are ill.
[311] Yedidya Center for Jewish Spiritual Direction – Located in Redwood City, CA, Yedidya is a center dedicated to the education and development of spiritual direction for the North American Jewish community.
[312] Prince, Michele F. "Judaism, Health, and Healing: How a New Jewish Communal Field Took Root and Where It Might Grow." *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, vol. 84, no. 3/4, 2009, pp. 280–291.
[313] http://jewishwisdomandwellness.org/about-us/about-the-kalsman-institute/.

The T'shuvah Center

Located in New York, the T'shuvah Center focuses on the recovery of addicts of all kinds in the Jewish community. Rabbi Rachael Pass, the Associate Rabbi of the T'shuvah Center, described most of what she does as "…one-on-one pastoral counseling…like a guided kind of counseling…where I direct people in certain ways based on their spiritual needs."[314] Along with one-on-one counseling, the T'shuvah Center offers recovery groups that are specific to particular addictions or demographics of people, such as an "Artists in Recovery Group" in which, for example, the recovery journey is processed through art.

Synagogue Responses

Some progressive synagogues with a focus on mental health have begun to employ social workers to help their staff and congregants navigate mental illness and major life changes. Temple Beth Elohim of Wellesley, Massachusetts has a social worker on staff who offers counseling for those in the community. Congregation B'nai Jeshurun of Short Hills, New Jersey also employs a social worker who is available for congregants during life changes and mental health crises. These are just a few examples of synagogues who have begun to recognize the importance of mental health care for the staff and community.

Many synagogues have created mental health task forces and small groups, getting congregants involved in the care of their fellow congregants. Temple Shaaray Tefila in Manhattan has a lay-led Mental Health Task force whose mission is "to raise

[314] Pass, Rabbi Rachael. *Thesis Interview about the T'shuvah Center*. 12 Oct. 2021.

awareness of mental health issues, including suicide prevention, alternatives to police-crisis intervention, and promoting mental health insurance parity in local hospitals."[315] Temple Shaaray Tefila and other synagogues like it are using their Mental Health Task Forces to bring awareness and to offer education and support for any of their congregants experiencing mental health challenges.

Many synagogues are also focusing more of their prayer services on the "healing service" model, in which the prayers are primarily focused on healing and gathering together to support those in the community in need of support. With this structure in mind, I crafted my senior recital entitled "*Karati Yah* – Calling Out in Song: From Crisis to Healing" - in the form of a healing service. The recital included both Jewish and secular music that I felt was particularly expressive of the journey through mental health healing and recovery. The musical choices were woven together by original blessings that express the pain of mental illness and gratitude for life. In the recital program, I wrote:

> "We read the verse above [Deuteronomy 30:19] each year during our High Holy Day season, and each year I am troubled. To someone suffering from any form of mental illness, to "choose life" is not quite that simple. When in bouts of distress, making the choice to keep our bodies functioning on this earth often takes more strength and courage than the alternative. Once we do so, joy and happiness do not automatically follow.
>
> Yes, we have the power to choose to live - and it is far more convoluted and painful than we often decide to speak about with one another. It is our responsibility as Jewish professionals - as Jewish people - to dismantle the stigma of mental illness and the stigma of speaking about our mental health. The more we open up and share our journeys, the more we become real, accessible human beings who make space for others to share their own struggles.
> This recital explores the trajectory of understanding oneself and the process of finding hope when it feels as though there is none. May we continue to speak to each other, to listen to one another, and thereby be reminded that we can find light in places of darkness."[316]

[315] Anonymous. *Conversation with Temple Shaaray Tefila Mental Health Task Force Chair*. 29 Jan. 2022.
[316] Mark, Jenna. *Karati Yah - Calling out in Song: From Crisis to Healing*. 8 Dec. 2021.

It is my hope that we continue to speak up and speak out about mental illness, so that people struggling know that there is help and that they are not alone.

APPENDIX

Senior Recital Program of Jenna Mark

קָרָאתִי יָהּ

calling out in song: from crisis to healing

הַחַיִּים וְהַמָּוֶת נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה
וּבָחַרְתָּ בַּחַיִּים
לְמַעַן תִּחְיֶה אַתָּה וְזַרְעֶךָ.
(Deut. 30:19)

I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse.
Choose life –
so that you and your offspring shall live.

We read the verse above each year during our High Holy Day season, and each year I am troubled. To someone suffering from any form of mental illness, to "choose life" is not quite that simple. When in bouts of distress, making the choice to keep our bodies functioning on this earth often takes more strength and courage than the alternative. Once we do so, joy and happiness do not automatically follow.

Yes, we have the power to choose to live - and it is far more convoluted and painful than we often decide to speak about with one another. It is our responsibility as Jewish professionals - as Jewish people - to dismantle the stigma of mental illness and the stigma of speaking about our mental health. The more we open up and share our journeys, the more we become real, accessible human beings who make space for others to share their own struggles.

This recital explores the trajectory of understanding oneself and the process of finding hope when it feels as though there is none. May we continue to speak to each other, to listen to one another, and thereby be reminded that we can find light in places of darkness.

AFTER ALL

Dar Williams

The Green World, Burning Field Music (ASCAP)/Administered by BUG MUSIC, 2000

Go ahead push your luck - find out how much love the world can hold.
Once upon a time I had control and reined my soul in tight.
Well the whole truth is like the story of a wave unfurled,
but I held the evil of the world so I stopped the tide froze it up from inside.
And it felt like a winter machine that you go through and then
you catch your breath and winter starts again and everyone else is spring bound.
And when I chose to live there was no joy it's just a line I crossed
it wasn't worth the pain my death would cost, so I was not lost or found.

Well, the sun rose with so many colors it nearly broke my heart.
It worked me over like a work of art, and I was a part of all that.
So go ahead push your luck, say what it is you gotta say to me.
We will push on into that mystery, and it will push right back, and there are worse things than that.
'Cause for every price and every penance that I could think of
it's better to have fallen in love than never to have fallen at all.
'Cause when you live in a world, well it gets in to who you thought you'd be,
and now I laugh at how the world changed me -- I think life chose me, after all.

May we behold the art of the risen sun and - someday - realize that we are a part of that creation.

blessing one

All blessings written by Jenna Mark

Holy One of Compassion,
Creator of all that is life,
Illustrator of light and darkness --
I turn to you now more than ever before.
I am told that the sun will rise - that the seasons will change - that I will laugh once again.
I have read our liturgy, our psalms, our stories.
I imagine our ancestors who were plagued by their own brokenness.
I know that many have walked in the shadow of pain before me.
I have heard your call to "choose life."
I have trusted You. I have leaned on You. I have believed in You.
So why, when I need You most, do I not feel You with me?
Why, when I call out for You from the depths of my sadness, do You not answer me?
I sit in solidarity with my thoughts of hurt and hunger.
I crumple in isolation as my body and my mind plague me with pain and suffering.
Why do You challenge me when all I want is to crawl out of this pit?
Haven't I suffered enough?
God of Judgment,
Dayan HaEmet --
I stand before You feeling depleted.
I try my best to honor from where I came.
I do all I can to make myself a living sanctuary.
Da lifnei mi atah omeid?
Da'i lifnei mi at omedet?
I believe I know before whom I stand.
I am trying my very best to serve You and those to come.
Yet, I overload and overwhelm myself, and I barely make it through.
Still, I have not succumbed to my deepest secrets.
So why do I fear each slip of my mind?
Why does each day hold the weight of the ultimate day of judgment?

part one - from the depths

AKAWYO BEN MAHALALEL

Cantor Israel Alter, *z"l* | Pirkei Avot 3:1

עֲקַבְיָא בֶן מַהֲלַלְאֵל אוֹמֵר, הִסְתַּכֵּל
בִּשְׁלֹשָׁה דְּבָרִים וְאִי אַתָּה בָּא לִידֵי עֲבֵרָה.
דַּע מֵאַיִן בָּאתָ, וּלְאָן אַתָּה הוֹלֵךְ, וְלִפְנֵי מִי
אַתָּה עָתִיד לִתֵּן דִּין וְחֶשְׁבּוֹן. מֵאַיִן בָּאתָ,
מִטִּפָּה סְרוּחָה, וּלְאָן אַתָּה הוֹלֵךְ, לִמְקוֹם
עָפָר רִמָּה וְתוֹלֵעָה.
וְלִפְנֵי מִי אַתָּה עָתִיד לִתֵּן דִּין וְחֶשְׁבּוֹן,
לִפְנֵי מֶלֶךְ מַלְכֵי הַמְּלָכִים
הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא.

Akavya ben Mahalalel said: "Mark well three things
and you will not come into the power of sin:
Know from where you come,
and where you are going,
and before whom you are destined
to give an account and reckoning.
From where do you come? From a putrid drop.
Where are you going?
To a place of dust, of worm and of maggot.
Before whom you are destined
to give an account and reckoning?
Before the Ruler, Ruler of rulers,
the Holy One, blessed be Adonai."

Akavya ben Mahalalel speaks of the fragility of life and our mortality.
We are but a minuscule drop, no different from the maggots of the earth.
"Know from whom you came, the legacy you intend to leave, and who is the ultimate Judge of life and death."
When one already feels as though they are a speck of nothingness, to hear these words reinforces the perception that we hold no power in our own lives. Yet, if we can place ourselves between what has come and what is to come, we can begin to feel wrapped in the generations of people who also felt this same nothingness - yet who made something out of life's fragility.

R'FAEINU V'NERAFEI

Aminadav Aloni | Liturgy

R'fuah Shleimah: Songs for Jewish Healing, Transcontinental Music Publications, 2002

רְפָאֵנוּ יְהוָה וְנֵרָפֵא הוֹשִׁיעֵנוּ וְנִוָּשֵׁעָה

Heal us, O Lord, and we shall be healed. Save us, save us, and we shall be saved.

רְפָאֵנוּ יְהוָה וְנֵרָפֵא הוֹשִׁיעֵנוּ וְנִוָּשֵׁעָה וְהַעֲלֵה רְפוּאָה שְׁלֵמָה לְכָל מַכּוֹתֵינוּ

Grant us a perfect healing from all our wounds.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה רוֹפֵא הַחוֹלִים.

Each day we read the liturgy of our Amidah *asking for a complete healing of body and soul. Yet this musical setting by Aminadav Aloni removes the Hebrew* הַנֶּפֶשׁ *and* הַגוּף *and uses the word "wounds" as a catch-all for any afflictions of body and spirit. This is intriguing as the body and the spirit are inextricably linked; however, each deserves its own focus and care. This piece also assumes God as savior and removes any autonomy over one's own healing. I believe there is power in both striving to manifest one's own healing, as well as releasing oneself to an unknown. Healing is not a "one size fits all" process.*

HASHKIVEINU

Yehezkel Braun, *z"l* | Liturgy

Evening Service for the Sabbath, Israel Music Institute, 1964

הַשְׁכִּיבֵנוּ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ לְשָׁלוֹם,וְהַעֲמִידֵנוּ מַלְכֵּנוּ
שׁוֹמְרֵנוּ לְחַיִּים וּפְרוֹשׂ עָלֵינוּ סֻכַּת שְׁלוֹמֶךָ,
וְתַקְּנֵנוּ בְּעֵצָה טוֹבָה מִלְּפָנֶיךָ, וְהוֹשִׁיעֵנוּ לְמַעַן
שְׁמֶךָ, וְהָגֵן בַּעֲדֵנוּ, וְהָסֵר מֵעָלֵינוּ אוֹיֵב, דֶּבֶר,
וְחֶרֶב, וְרָעָב וְיָגוֹן, וְהָסֵר שָׂטָן מִלְּפָנֵינוּ
וּמֵאַחֲרֵנוּ, וּבְצֵל כְּנָפֶיךָ תַּסְתִּירֵנוּ. כִּי אֵל מַלְכֵּנוּ
שׁוֹמְרֵנוּ וּמַצִּילֵנוּ אָתָּה, כִּי אֵל מֶלֶךְ חַנּוּן וְרַחוּם
אָתָּה, וּשְׁמוֹר צֵאתֵנוּ וּבוֹאֵנוּ, לְחַיִּים וּלְשָׁלוֹם,
מֵעַתָּה וְעַד עוֹלָם. וּפְרוֹשׂ עָלֵינוּ סֻכַּת שְׁלוֹמֶךָ.
בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, הַפּוֹרֵשׂ סֻכַּת שָׁלוֹם עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל
עַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל וְעַל יְרוּשָׁלָיִם.

Lie us down to peace, Adonai our God, and raise us up to life, our protector, and spread over us the shelter of Your peace, and direct us with good advice before You, and save us for the sake of Your name, and look out for us, and keep enemies, plagues, swords, famines, and troubles from our midst, and remove Satan from in front of us and from behind us, and cradle us in the shadow of your wings, for You are God who guards us and saves us, for You are God. Our gracious and merciful protector, guard our departure and our arrival to life and to peace, from now and ever more. And spread over us the shelter of your peace. Blessed are You, Adonai, who spreads a shelter of peace over us, over all of God's People Israel, and over Jerusalem.

We are most vulnerable when we close our eyes and release ourselves to sleep. In this state of helplessness we succumb to our enemies both external and internal. When Hashkiveinu *was conceived, our liturgists were consumed by the threat of harmful physical plagues to the Jewish people. In our Reform spaces, we often omit the challenging imagery of "enemies, plagues, swords, famine...Satan," for we no longer sleep outside in the expanse of the wilderness. Yet many of us yearn to be shielded from our own inner demons. The swords with which we fight and the famines we inflict upon ourselves can be our own worst enemies.*
May there come a time when we are no longer plagued by our own worst notions. May there come a time when God's sukkat shalom *is just that - a shelter of peace, and not a plea for safety.*

continuation of blessing one

O God,
Please -
Answer me.
Be a healer of my broken heart.
Help me to feel alive in this life again - and not as though my soul has died before my body.
Help me to see the beauty in my brokenness,
For what is life without cracks?
But I don't want to live solely in the cracks.
Love me and hold me - because I need You.
Please, dear God, remind me each day, each moment, of the blessing of my life.
Remind me that I am special and necessary in this world.
Never stop telling me that I am holy, like You.
Baruch atah Adonai, borei habracha.
Blessed are You, Adonai, Creator of blessing.

ANNEINI

Noah Aronson | Psalm 118:5

More Love Complete Songbook, NoahAronson.com, 2017

מִן-הַמֵּצַר, קָרָאתִי יָהּ, עָנָנִי בַמֶּרְחָב יָהּ.
אוֹדְךָ, כִּי עֲנִיתָנִי; וַתְּהִי-לִי, לִישׁוּעָה.

Anneini - Answer me
I called out to you from a narrow place.
Your answer came to me from a wide open space.
My heart cried out for You, wherever You are.
Your hand reached out to me. Min hameitzar.

From the depths, I cried out to You. You could not pull me out, nor did I want that from You.
But You joined me down in the pit, for You - and you - have been there before and know the way out.

blessing two

Holy One of Healing,
Comforter of loneliness -
I know that I must not be isolated in feeling sorrow.
Nothing makes me so special that you choose me, and me alone,
to feel such heartache.
There must be others out in the void -
Others who know being beaten down by one's own consciousness.
Others who understand the link between body and mind -
And, like me, fear how both will plummet into the depths if just one feels broken and out of sorts.
Helper of humanity -
Help me.
Help me find the words to express my yearnings.

part two - beautiful and whole

ASHER YATZAR
Dan Nichols | Liturgy
Beautiful and Broken: Music for Prayer, DanNicholsMusic.com, 2016

I thank You for my life, body, and soul. Help me realize I am beautiful and whole.
I'm perfect the way I am and a little broken too. I will live each day as a gift I give to You.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי, רוֹפֵא כָל בָּשָׂר וּמַפְלִיא לַעֲשׂוֹת.

No piece of Jewish music was mentioned more in my thesis interviews than Dan Nichols' setting of Asher Yatzar. *The desire to feel brokenness as not a curse but instead a blessing was overwhelmingly present in the hearts of those who spoke with me about their struggles with depression and anxiety.*
To echo Dan's original English translation, we are all a little broken, just as we ought to be.

continuation of blessing two

I do question You.
All the time.
And in my trembling, I have felt You still.
I cannot make sense of it, but I know that You are there.
Lo titein chasidav lirot shachat -
Yet, I do still fall inside the pit.
But with Your hand beside me,
The deepest cavern is not as scary.
I discover more and more how shaken my world can make me,
The task is too heavy; You and I cannot do it alone.
Help me ask for what I need.
I know that I am not the only one who shudders from their own turmoil.
Bring me to them.
Give me the strength to hold another hand -
Not only Yours.
For I feel simple and do not know how to ask for help.
I never felt that I could without losing my dignity.
I know others are out there,
I can feel it.
No one can live this life of detachment.
Dear God -
Guide me out of this path of darkness,
Share with me the reins of my own life.
Lead me to those who have been in this abyss before.
And please,
Never stop reminding me that this world, full as it may be, needs me.
Baruch Atah Adonai, shoteif b'rifui.
Blessed are You, Adonai, Partner in healing.

SHIVITI

Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco | Psalm 16:8-9

Memorial Service for the Departed, Mills Music: New York, 1961

שִׁוִּיתִי יְהוָה לְנֶגְדִּי תָמִיד
כִּי מִימִינִי בַּל־אֶמּוֹט.
לָכֵן שָׂמַח לִבִּי וַיָּגֶל כְּבוֹדִי
אַף־בְּשָׂרִי יִשְׁכֹּן לָבֶטַח.

I am ever mindful of Adonai's presence;
God is at my right hand;
I shall never be shaken.
So my heart rejoices,
my whole being exults,
and my body rests secure.

Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco's setting of Shiviti *calls for partnership as we walk through the challenges of life. The choir echoes and expands upon the solo's melody as an expression of God's presence holding us steady. Verse 10 of Psalm 16 (not included in this setting) reads: "For You will not abandon me to Sheol or let Your faithful one see the pit." As we work toward healing, or even merely stasis, to allow oneself to see the imagery of the depths can be detrimental. I interpret Castelnuovo-Tedesco's choice to end his setting with a body at rest as his way of helping us avoid submitting ourselves to the challenges that have caused us harm. Attempting a mindset of joy and exultation, even when we do not feel joy and exultation, may steer us away from self-harm and self-doubt and bring us closer toward a sense of safety and security.*

NO ONE IS ALONE

Music & Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, *z"l* | from the musical *Into The Woods*

Rilting Music Inc., administered by Geffen Music, 1988

Mother cannot guide you. Now you're on your own. Only me beside you.
Still, you're not alone. No one is alone. Truly, no one is alone.
Sometimes people leave you halfway through the wood. Others may deceive you.
You decide what's good. You decide alone, but no one is alone.
Mother isn't here now. Wrong things, right things.
Who knows what she'd say? Who can say what's true?
Nothing's quite so clear now. Do things, fight things.
Feel you've lost your way?
You decide, but you are not alone. Believe me, no one is alone.
No one is alone. Believe me. Truly.
You move just a finger. Say the slightest word. Something's bound to linger. Be heard.
No one acts alone. Careful, no one is alone.
People make mistakes: fathers, mothers.
People make mistakes holding to their own; thinking they're alone.
Fight for their mistakes. Honor their mistakes.
Everybody makes one another's terrible mistakes.
Witches can be right, giants can be good. You decide what's right, you decide what's good.
Just remember: Someone is on your side. Our side. Someone else is not.
While we're seeing our side - our side - maybe we forgot, they are not alone.
No one is alone.
Hard to see the light now. Just don't let it go.
Things will come out right now, we can make it so.
Someone is on your side - no one is alone.

On November 26, 2021, we lost one of the biggest musical giants of our time. Stephen Sondheim's art will continue to have a tremendous impact on everyone whose lives he touched, in particular those who found themselves feeling set apart and alone. I was first introduced as a young child to his Tony Award winning musical, Into the Woods*. My brother and I spent countless hours watching the video of the original musical from 1987, and we tested our artistic visions as we put on our own home productions of* Into the Woods *for anyone who walked through our living room. Throughout my life, "No One is Alone" became a piece of music that helped me to embrace the discomfort of life while also bringing comfort to me when I felt out of place and disheartened. It enabled me to recognize a person's agency in their own feelings of loneliness. It reminded me that people have walked in these footsteps before. There will always be someone to listen to our stories, to reach out their hand, to walk next to us as we to try to see the light.*

blessing three

Holy One of Blessing,
Shepherd of renewal and hope,
Source of strength and courage -
Thank you.
There may not be a time when I feel no pain,
Nor an age when I do not crumble -
But finally I feel that I am not alone.
In my comings and my goings, You are with me.
Your people are with me.
I am with me.
I no longer fear the walk through my valley of deepest darkness,
For you walk alongside me
Whispering my worth,
Reminding me of meaning.
These hurts may not heal,
These ghosts may still loom,
But they remain the scars that make me extraordinarily me.
My wounds are flaws, no longer,
But blessings.
I lift up my eyes
And see the eyes of those who, too, have lifted their eyes.
The hills that I once feared traversing are still treacherous and exhausting,
But they are no longer unclimbable
If we climb the hills together.
The beauty of mountains are the highs and lows.
For who wants a world that lies flat?
O God,
Continue to break us open;
Allow our cracks to let the light in.
Flood our souls with the knowledge that we have authority in our own healing.
It takes a village to heal a broken soul,
And
It takes both You and me.

part three - i lift up my eyes

PSALM 23

Dr. Michael Isaacson | Psalm 23

Transcontinental Music Publications, 1979

מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד יְהוָה רֹעִי לֹא אֶחְסָר.
בִּנְאוֹת דֶּשֶׁא יַרְבִּיצֵנִי עַל־מֵי מְנֻחוֹת יְנַהֲלֵנִי.
נַפְשִׁי יְשׁוֹבֵב יַנְחֵנִי בְמַעְגְּלֵי־צֶדֶק לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ.
גַּם כִּי־אֵלֵךְ בְּגֵיא צַלְמָוֶת לֹא־אִירָא רָע כִּי־אַתָּה
עִמָּדִי שִׁבְטְךָ וּמִשְׁעַנְתֶּךָ הֵמָּה יְנַחֲמֻנִי.
תַּעֲרֹךְ לְפָנַי ׀ שֻׁלְחָן נֶגֶד צֹרְרָי דִּשַּׁנְתָּ בַשֶּׁמֶן רֹאשִׁי
כּוֹסִי רְוָיָה.
וְאַךְ ׀ טוֹב וָחֶסֶד יִרְדְּפוּנִי כָּל־יְמֵי חַיָּי וְשַׁבְתִּי
בְּבֵית־יְהוָה לְאֹרֶךְ יָמִים.

Adonai is my shepherd; I lack nothing.
God makes me lie down in green pastures;
God leads me to water in places of repose;
God renews my life; God guides me in right paths as befits God's name. Though I walk through a valley of deepest darkness I fear no harm, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff—they comfort me. You spread a table for me in full view of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my drink is abundant. Only goodness and steadfast love shall pursue me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of Adonai for many long years.

Not until we are able to recognize our inner needs are we able to accept support and care from our loved ones. We each have known rock bottom. Psalm 23 depicts the this darkness we have once faced and illuminates the support we may receive from those surrounding us near and far. Through such sacred partnership, we can strive to pull ourselves out of the darkness and live a life of renewal and repose.

LIGHT

Music by Tom Kitt & Lyrics by Brian Yorkey | from the musical *Next to Normal*

Alfred Publishing Co., Inc., Lonely Satellite Music, Tom Kitt Music & Warner-Tamerlane Publishing Corp, 2009.

We need some light, first of all, we need some light. You can't sit here in the dark
and all alone, it's a sorry sight. It's just you and me - we'll live, you'll see.
Night after night, we'd sit and wait for the morning light,
but we've waited far too long for all that's wrong to be made right.
Day after day, wishing all our cares away, trying to fight the things we feel, but some hurts never heal.
Some ghosts are never gone but we go on. We still go on.
And you find some way to survive, and you find out you don't have to be happy at all
to be happy you're alive.
Day after day, give me clouds and rain and gray. Give me pain, if that's what's real.
It's the price we pay to feel. The price of love is loss, but still we pay - we love anyway.
And when the night has finally gone, and when we see the new day dawn
we'll wonder how we wandered for so long, so blind.
The wasted world we thought we knew - the light will make it look brand new. So...Let it shine.
Day after day, day after day, we'll find the will to find our way.
Knowing that the darkest skies will someday see the sun.
When our long night is done there will be light
When we open up our lives - sons and daughters, husbands, wives can fight that fight.
There will be light.

ESAH EINAI

Cantor Benjie Ellen Schiller| Psalm 121

Unpublished Manuscript, 2021

אֶשָּׂא עֵינַי אֶל־הֶהָרִים מֵאַיִן יָבֹא עֶזְרִי. עֶזְרִי מֵעִם יְהוָה עֹשֵׂה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ.
אַל־יִתֵּן לַמּוֹט רַגְלֶךָ אַל־יָנוּם שֹׁמְרֶךָ. הִנֵּה לֹא־יָנוּם וְלֹא יִישָׁן שׁוֹמֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל.

I lift up my eyes to the hills, from where will my help come?
From where will my help come?
My help comes from the Unseen One, Maker of heaven and earth,
who will not cause my foot to fail,
your Protector never slumbers.
Behold the One who slumbers not,
the Guardian of Israel, the Guardian of Israel.

יְהוָה שֹׁמְרֶךָ יְהוָה צִלְּךָ עַל־יַד יְמִינֶךָ. יוֹמָם הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ לֹא־יַכֶּכָּה וְיָרֵחַ בַּלָּיְלָה.
יְהוָה יִשְׁמָרְךָ מִכָּל־רָע יִשְׁמֹר אֶת־נַפְשֶׁךָ. יְהוָה יִשְׁמָר־צֵאתְךָ וּבוֹאֶךָ מֵעַתָּה וְעַד־עוֹלָם.

I lift up my eyes to the hills, from where will my help come?
From where will my help come?
My help comes from the Unseen One, Maker of heaven and earth,
who will not cause my foot to fail,
your Protector never slumbers.
Behold the One who slumbers not,
the Guardian of Israel, the Guardian of Israel.
Guard our going out
and our coming in
from now forever more.

מֵעַתָּה וְעַד־עוֹלָם.

Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw. - Gen. 22:12
Rebecca lifted her eyes and saw Isaac. - Gen. 24:64
Looking up, Jacob saw Esau coming. - Gen. 33:1

Like my ancestors, I lift up my eyes and see the help I need, right in front of me.

continuation of blessing three

Rofei HaCholim -
Healer of the sick,
Comfort us when we need it most,
But do not hide all of life's challenges from us.
Life will always contain illness that seems everlasting -
For I have seen this all too well.
Yet, I have learned from my hurt in ways I never thought I could.
God, bring sorrow and joy together at life's intersections.
Let me walk alongside those who feel pain,
And encourage me and us to choose joy first.
Sustain us with "the courage to make all of our lives a blessing."
Strengthen us with the bravery to always "choose life"
No matter how hard that may be.
And, for me, remind me that I, like You, have chosen to find joy in song - bocheiret b'shirei zimrah.
Baruch Atah Adonai, borei chayim.
Blessed are You, Adonai, Creator of life.

HEAL US NOW

Cantor Leon Sher | Liturgy
Transcontinental Music Publications, 2006

רְפָאֵנוּ יְיָ וְנֵרָפֵא, הוֹשִׁיעֵנוּ וְנִוָּשֵׁעָה. אֵל קָרוֹב לְכָל קוֹרְאָיו. אַךְ קָרוֹב לִירֵאָיו יִשְׁעוֹ.
We pray for healing of the body. We pray for healing of the soul.
For strength of flesh and mind and spirit. We pray to once again be whole.
אֵל נָא רְפָא נָא.
Oh, please, heal us now.
רְפוּאַת הַנֶּפֶשׁ וּרְפוּאַת הַגוּף, רְפוּאָה שְׁלֵמָה.
Heal us now.
הוֹשִׁיעָה אֶת-עַמֶּךָ וּבָרֵךְ אֶת-נַחֲלָתֶךָ וּרְעֵם וְנַשְּׂאֵם עַד-הָעוֹלָם. מִי שֶׁבֵּרַךְ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ,
מִי שֶׁבֵּרַךְ אִמּוֹתֵינוּת אָנָּא יְיָ הוֹשִׁיעָה נָּא.
We pray for healing of our people. We pray for healing of the land.
And peace for every race and nation, every child, *every person, every friend.

**newly adapted lyrics to include all peoples*

Heal Us Now *conveys a universal message of healing for our time. Cantor Leon Sher's choral setting has become our prayer for global and communal healing. We move from individual healing of "flesh and mind and spirit" toward our responsibility to take care of all those in our world. Both the individual and the communal work exists in tandem. As we think about mental health, we are reminded that the sharing of our individual journeys can, in fact, help our communal mental health and destigmatize what it means to suffer from depression, anxiety, and other mental illness.*

benediction

In my moments of deepest struggle, I turn to the lyrics:
"Help us find the courage to make our lives a blessing."
No matter the emotional distress, this life is a blessing.
Our lives are blessings.
May we find the courage to believe this to be true.
And let us say, amen.

Mi SHEBEIRACH

Debbie Friedman, *z"l &* Rabbi Drorah Setel | Liturgy
Sing Unto God: The Debbie Friedman Anthology, Transcontinental Music Publications, 2013

מִי שֶׁבֵּרַךְ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ מְקוֹר הַבְּרָכָה לְאִמּוֹתֵינוּ
May the source of strength who blessed the ones before us
help us find the courage to make our lives a blessing. And let us say, amen.
מִי שֶׁבֵּרַךְ אִמּוֹתֵינוּ, מְקוֹר הַבְּרָכָה לַאֲבוֹתֵינוּ
Bless those in need of healing with r'fuah sh'leimah.
the renewal of body, the renewal of spirit. And let us say, amen.

Works Cited

"About the Kalsman Institute : Jewish Wisdom and Wellness." *https://jewishwisdomandwellness.org*, jewishwisdomandwellness.org/about-us/about-the-kalsman-institute.

Address, Rabbi Richard. "Tradition, Texts, and Our Search for Meaning." *Judaism and Health: A Handbook of Practical, Professional and Scholarly Resources*, edited by Jeff Levin and Michele F. Prince, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013, pp. 157–168.

Adler, Rabbi Rachel. "Bad Things Happen: On Suffering." *Judaism and Health: A Handbook of Practical, Professional and Scholarly Resources*, edited by Jeff Levin and Michele F. Prince, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013, pp. 169–173.

Alter, Cantor Israel. *Akavya Ben Mahalalel*. Unknown.

"American Psychological Association (APA)." *https://www.apa.org*.

Anonymous. *Footsteps*. 1960.

Anonymous. "My Abortion Was a Blessing. As a Rabbi, I Will Fight for Others to Be Able to Make Their Own Sacred Choice." *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, 3 Sept. 2021, jta.org.

Anonymous. *Thesis Interview.* 14 Jul. 2021.

Anonymous. *Thesis Interview.* 27 Jul. 2021.

Anonymous. *Thesis Interview.* 28 Jul. 2021.

Anonymous. *Thesis Interview.* 2 Aug. 2021.

Anonymous. *Thesis Interview.* 5 Oct. 2021.

Anonymous. *Thesis Interview*. 12 Oct. 2021.

Anonymous. *Thesis Interview.* 17 Oct. 2021.

Anonymous. *Thesis Interview*. 19 Oct. 2021.

Anonymous. *Conversation with Temple Shaaray Tefila Mental Health Task Force Chair*. 29 Jan. 2022.

Aronson, Emily. *From Curing to Crying: Determining God's Role in Healing for Those with Chronic Illness*. 2021, p. 23.

Bordowitz, Hank. “Debbie Friedman: Singing unto God.” *My Jewish Learning*, www.myjewishlearning.com/article/debbie-friedman-singing-unto-god/.

Braun, Yehezkel. *Hashkiveinu*. Israel Music Institute, 1964.

Burnham, Bo. *Inside*. Netflix, 2021.

Caring for the Soul: R’fuat HaNefesh - A Mental Health Resource and Study Guide. Edited by Rabbi Richard F. Address, UAHC Press, 2003.

Eglash, Joel N. *The Complete Shireinu*. Transcontinental Music Publications, 2002.

Eisen, Arnold. “Choose Life: American Jews and the Quest for Healing.” *Healing and the Jewish Imagination: Spiritual and Practical Perspectives on Judaism and Health*, edited by Rabbi William Cutter, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2007, pp. 15–41.

Eliyahu Munk Translation. Lambda Publishers, 1998. *Sefaria.org.*

Feldman, Elizabeth. “Spiritual Resources for Jewish Healthcare Professionals.” *Judaism and Health: A Handbook of Practical, Professional and Scholarly Resources*, edited by Jeff Levin and Michele F. Prince, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013, pp. 54–68.

Friedman, Debbie. “Mi Shebeirach.” *Sing unto God: The Debbie Friedman Anthology*, edited by Joel N. Eglash, Transcontinental Music Publications, 2014.

Frymer-Kensky, Tikva. “Rachel: Bible.” *Jewish Women’s Archive*, 20 Mar. 2009. *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/rachel-bible.

Geringer, Rabbi Kim S. *Sometimes It’s Not Your Fault*. Yom Kippur Morning.

Green, Arthur. “Mystical Sources of the Healing Movement.” *Healing and the Jewish Imagination: Spiritual and Practical Perspectives on Judaism and Healthy*, edited by Rabbi William Cutter, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2007, pp. 51–62.

Hoffman, Seymour. *Mental Health, Psychotherapy and Judaism*. Mondial, 2011.

“Home - Invisible Disabilities® Association.” *Invisible Disabilities® Association*, invisibledisabilities.org.

Jacobson, Simon. “A Mother’s Tears - Rachel Weeps for Her Children.” *The Jewish Woman*, www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/1414106/jewish/A-Mothers-Tears.htm.

“Johns Hopkins HealthCare Solutions.” *Johns Hopkins HealthCare Solutions*, johnshopkinssolutions.com.

Kushner, Harold S. *The Lord Is My Shepherd: Healing Wisdom of the Twenty-Third Psalm*. New York, Anchor Books, 2004.

Kushner, Harold S. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People: 20th Anniversary Edition, with a New Preface by the Author*. New York, Schocken Books, 2001.

Landsberg, Rabbi Lynne F., and Shelly Thomas Christensen. "Judaism and Disability: R'fuat Hanefesh - the Healing of Our Souls, Individual and Communal." *Judaism and Health: A Handbook of Practical, Professional and Scholarly Resources*, edited by Jeff Levin and Michele F. Prince, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013, pp. 174–189.

Levin, Jeff, and Michele F. Prince. "Introduction: Judaism and Health." *Judaism and Health: A Handbook of Practical, Professional and Scholarly Resources*, edited by Jeff Levin and Michele F. Prince, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013, pp. xix–xxviii.

Lipman, Rabbi Kennard. "Mental Illness through the Prism of Jewish Texts." *Caring for the Soul: R'fuat HaNefesh - a Mental Health Resource and Study Guide*, edited by Rabbi Richard F. Address, UAHC Press, 2003, pp. 3–9.

Mark, Jenna. *Karati Yah - Calling out in Song: From Crisis to Healing*. 8 Dec. 2021.

Menahem Mendel, Of Kotsk, et al. *The Sayings of Menahem Mendel of Kotsk*. Northvale, N.J., Jason Aronson, 1995.

Metsudah Linear Siddur. Avrohom Davis 1981. *Sefaria.org.*

Moshe Mykoff, Breslow Research Inst., 1986-2012. Translation. *Sefaria.org.*

Nachman, Rabbi, and Aryeh Kaplan. *Rabbi Nachman's Stories: The Stories of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (Sippurey Ma'asioth)*. Brooklyn, N.Y., Breslov Research Institute, 1983.

"National Eating Disorders Association." *Nationaleatingdisorders.org*, 2018, www.nationaleatingdisorders.org.

Nichols, Dan. *Asher Yatzar*. 2016, dannicholsmusic.com.

Olitzky, Kerry M. *Jewish Paths toward Healing and Wholeness: A Personal Guide to Dealing with Suffering*. Woodstock, Vt., Jewish Lights Pub, 2000.

Pass, Rabbi Rachael. *Thesis Interview about the T'shuvah Center*. 12 Oct. 2021.

Prince, Michele F. "Judaism, Health, and Healing: How a New Jewish Communal Field Took Root and Where It Might Grow." *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, vol. 84, no. 3/4, 2009, pp. 280–291.

"Rachel Cowan." *Jewish Women's Archive*, jwa.org/feminism/cowan-rachel.

Robbins, Debra J. *Opening Your Heart with Psalm 27: A Spiritual Practice for the Jewish New Year*. New York, Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2019.

Rosenzweig, Franz. *The Star of Redemption*. Notre Dame, In., Notre Dame Press, 2014.

Sargon, Simon. *Sing His Praise: A Friday Evening Service for Youth Choir*. Transcontinental Music Publications, 1981.

Sefaria Community Translation. *Sefaria.org.*

Soncino Press, (Translation) 1946. *Sefaria.org.*

Spero, Moshe HaLevi. *Handbook of Psychotherapy and Jewish Ethics*. Feldheim Pub, 1986.

"The Jewish Publication Society." *Sefaria.org*.

"The William Davidson Talmud." *Koren-Steinsaltz*, *Sefaria.org.*

Twerski, Rabbi Abraham J. "Judaism and Addiction." *Judaism and Health: A Handbook of Practical, Professional and Scholarly Resources*, edited by Jeff Levin and Michele F. Prince, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013, pp. 239–250.

Upbin, Rabbi Danielle. "Min Ha-Meitzar: Calling to God from the Depths." *Jewish Press of Pinellas County*, 8 Sept. 2021, www.jewishpresspinellas.com/articles/min-ha-meitzar-calling-to-god-from-the-depths/.

"Week 1 Video Teaching Transcript." *Institute for Jewish Spirituality*, https://www.jewishspirituality.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Week-1-Video-Transcript-Questions.pdf.

Weintraub, Rabbi Simkha Y. "At the Bedside in the Babylonian Talmud: Reflections on Classical Rabbinic Healers and Their Approaches to Helping the Suffering." *Judaism and Health: A Handbook of Practical, Professional and Scholarly Resources*, edited by Jeff Levin and Michele F. Prince, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013, pp. 8–19.

Weintraub, Rabbi Simkha Y. "Jewish Prayer for the Sick: Mi Sheberach." *My Jewish Learning*, www.myjewishlearning.com/article/mi-sheberakh-may-the-one-who-blessed/.

Wendell, Susan. "Unhealthy Disabled: Treating Chronic Illnesses as Disabilities." Hypatia, vol. 16 no. 4, 2001, p. 17-33. (Page 30)

World Health Organization. "Home." *who.int*, 2018, www.who.int.

Young, Cantor Natalie. *Be the Light*. 19 Nov. 2020, www.natalieyoungmusic.com/videoslisten.html.

Young, Cantor Natalie. *Carry Me*. 9 Nov. 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=57J4b7XSees.

Young, Cantor Natalie. *Holy Holy Holy*. 6 Feb. 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DbUwHd88KU.

Zornberg, Avivah Gottlieb. *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious*. New York, Schocken Books, 2009.

Additional Bibliography

Ettinger, Seth Marlon. *There's a Niggun for That!* 2014.

Gold, Rabbi Shefa. *The Magic of Hebrew Chant: Healing the Spirit, Transforming the Mind, Deepening Love*. Woodstock, Vt, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013.

Rosmarin, David. *Connections Paradigm: Ancient Jewish Wisdom for Modern Mental Health.* Templeton Press, 2020.

Rosmarin, David H, and Saul Haimoff. *Handbook of Torah and Mental Health*. White Plains, Ny, Mosaica Press, 2019.

Solovy, Alden T. *This Grateful Heart: Psalms and Prayers for a New Day*. New York, Reform Judaism Publishing, A Division of CCAR Press, 2017.

Weintraub, Rabbi Simkha Y. *Healing of Soul, Healing of Body: Spiritual Leaders Unfold the Strength & Solace in Psalms*. Woodstock, Vt., Jewish Lights Pub, 2002.