

A Communal Exploration Of Mental Illness

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Susan Reimer-Torn

For three consecutive Wednesday evenings, beginning April 30th, the [Drisha Institute for Jewish Education](#) will partner with [Congregation B'nai Jeshurun](#) to co-host a groundbreaking series of experiential workshops and lectures, "Confronting Mental Illness."

Devora Steinmetz, long known for her Talmudic erudition and rigorous pedagogic skills, and her husband Rabbi David Silber, founder of the Drisha Institute, recently spoke to The Jewish Week about their plans to address important social issues through the program.

Noted psychiatrists, therapists, authors and rabbis will join together to present "a thoughtful and nuanced way of thinking about this critical social issue" in the hope of raising awareness, deepening understanding, and offering new resources to the community, Steinmetz says.

Dr. Yitchak Schechter, Rabbi Alfredo Borodowski, Dr. Seth Aronson, Dr. Michelle Friedman and Dr. Marianne Farkas, along with Rabbi J. Rolando Matalon and Rabbi Felicia Sol of BJ, are among the distinguished presenters and facilitators.

"We want to reach out to the entire spectrum of the Jewish community," Steinmetz says.

She explains that one of the challenges in designing the series was connecting the discussion of mental illness to Jewish texts and tradition. Jewish texts are largely silent on the experience of mental illness; people who are mentally unsound are simply categorized, along with deaf-mutes and minors, as exempt from responsibility to fulfill mitzvot.

The silence of the tradition, says Steinmetz, is yet another way in which individuals with mental illness might feel alienated from Judaism and the Jewish community. Several of the workshops in this series are designed to help find ways in which Jewish tradition can speak to the experience of those with mental illness and their loved ones.



Devora Steinmetz. Courtesy of Drisha Institute

Steinmetz now works as a volunteer at [Gould Farm](#), a residential therapeutic community in the Berkshires where people with mental illness are supported in their transition to independent living. She hopes the Jewish community can explore ways to be more supportive of the process of recovery from mental illness.

While the three evenings are open to all, including those with lived experience and their families, Steinmetz especially welcomes clergy and concerned members of the community.

"Many people are in recovery. Illness is part of their experience; their challenge is to rebuild their lives, and the community has the responsibility to support that," she says.

The three evening series - April 30, May 7, May 13 -- is free of charge, at [Drisha](#), 37 West 65th Street, 5th Floor, New York.

Susan Reimer-Torn is the author of the memoir, "Maybe Not Such a Good Girl: Reflections on Rupture and Return," to be published in May.