

From Where Does My Help Come?

Drisha-B'nai Jeshurun series calls for new communal approach to mental illness.

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Susan Reimer-Torn

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Rabbi Mychal Springer, at podium, with Rabbi Rolando Matalon and Benyamin Cirlin. Courtesy of Drisha

‘We were 20 souls around the table. Some attended out of a healthy curiosity but most were warriors of a difficult life. Some were mothers who have tragically lost their children to their illnesses, others battled depression, and many college participants feared what the future would hold for them.’

Rabbi Alfredo Borodowski shared these remarks in a blog post for the [Rabbinical Assembly](#), the umbrella group for Conservative rabbis, after conducting a soul-baring workshop last month as part of a three-session series on “Confronting Mental Illness,” co-sponsored by Congregation B’nai Jeshurun and [Drisha Institute](#).

Ultimately, the rabbi continued in the post, “All were united by one quest: a Judaism that could help us to find who we are. We longed for a place of holiness and wholeness in the universe where we could be acknowledged and heard with acceptance and care.”

Rabbi Borodowski, founding spiritual leader of Congregation Sulam Yakov in Larchmont — whose own diagnosis as bipolar received much media attention after his arrest last summer for impersonating a police officer — was one of

many workshop leaders who participated in the program. For many Jews, community is an antidote to social isolation and existential loneliness.

In fact, Rabbi Borodowski, in a Jewish Week essay in March, emphasized his gratitude to his own Larchmont synagogue for standing by him throughout his difficult ordeal. But for some people facing mental illness and their loved ones, the Jewish community has not always earned high marks as a source of support.

The program, which organizers believed was the first of its kind to address the topic of mental illness in the Jewish community in such depth, addressed the issue with disarming openness and an array of practical resources. It took place in the *beit midrash*, the study hall, at Drisha, on the Upper West Side, and offered workshops and lectures facilitated by a roster of leading mental health and Jewish community professionals.

Devora Steinmetz, a Talmud scholar and educator who helped organize the program on behalf of Drisha, told The Jewish Week, "Our goals are to have a public conversation within the Jewish community, to introduce people to the possibility of recovery and to resources that support recovery, and to explore ways in which Jewish tradition can speak to the experience of mental illness."

As one participant in the crowd said, "It's about time this issue came out of the closet in the Jewish world." The sessions drew over 100 people for each of the Wednesday night meetings.

The workshops included "Struggling Toward Mental Health: Chasidic Wisdom and Modern Insight," "Music and Healing," "Accompanying People with Mental Illness" and "From the Depths I Have Called," which looked at emotional and religious expressions of both angst and healing in Psalms. Dr. Seth Aronson offered a series called "All of Us Are Much More Human Than Otherwise," which was for mental health professionals only, while Rabbi Borodowski led a workshop called "Exploring Mental Illness through Personal Stories."

Steinmetz has in recent months been working hands-on with people in recovery. She is a resident volunteer at Gould Farm, a therapeutic farming community in the Southern Berkshires where people struggling with mental illness can grow towards more independent lives. The setting of the sessions, in the study hall of an institution dedicated to Torah study, was an important symbol for Steinmetz and her husband, Rabbi David Silber, Drisha's founder. Steinmetz explained, "We want to explore in what ways the Jewish tradition could bring meaning, healing and a sense of personal worth" to this often terrifyingly lonely terrain of exclusion and despair.

On the program's opening night, Aronson asked his group of mental health professionals to extract meaning from the Talmudic definition of the mentally ill: Those who wander out alone at night, sleep in cemeteries and rip up their garments. Another group shared chasidic texts that delve into dark and fragmented states of mind, others analyzed Psalms; in his workshop, Rabbi Borodowski shared his struggle with bipolar disorder.

The second week emphasized available resources. Marianne Farkas, a professor at Sargent College of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences at Boston University, spoke about the process of recovery; she cited a statistic that with proper medication and a supportive environment, 65 percent of sufferers are able to live normal lives. She stressed that a suitable occupation is also beneficial. The bottom line message, she suggested, is that it is up to everyone in the Jewish community to offer appropriate support.

The shattered identity and loss of control that often characterizes mental illness can turn the sufferer into a pariah in the Jewish community, one known for its high-achieving members. In his workshop, Rabbi Borodowski, speaking in an honest, often raw way, described his inner state as a bipolar and highly accomplished adult. "I spent sleepless nights in despair wondering where I fit in the order of creation. What am I? Is it good that I am alive? What is my worth? Why was I born? Why did God create me like this?"

The closing session was a panel called "Living with Mental Illness: From Where Does My Help Come." It emphasized our common humanity and the error of seeing mental illness as a divide between the healthy and the ill. Benjamin Cirlin, executive director of the Center for Loss and Renewal, said, "Being human is being flawed and frightened; all of our lives is part of a sacred process of healing."

Rabbi Rolando Matalon of B'nai Jeshurun emphasized, "The community itself is a primary resource," even while conceding this is more of a desired goal than a reality at present.

Rabbi Mychal Springer, director of the [Center for Pastoral Education at the Jewish Theological Seminary](#), selected a passage from the Tahanun prayer as her resource of choice; she revealed how, as someone who has suffered in the past from severe bouts of depression, she understood the feeling expressed by the words *ein ozer*, or "there is no one to help." "A person cannot be judged if in one of these states he or she loses sight of God as a source of help. Sometimes all you can do is lie low. We have to accept the full spectrum of doubters seeking to believe and those with faith plunging into doubt."

When Rabbi Matalon cited Psalm 30, with its imagery alternating between the brink of the grave and being brought back to life, Rabbi Springer countered that the possibility of moving from weeping to joy does not always seem accessible to a person in the depths of suffering. Her moving self-disclosure was reflective of the honesty, openness and vulnerability that seemed to grow stronger throughout the event; for some, by week three, Drisha's beit midrash seemed to function as a safe space where people might begin to heal from terror and isolation. Rabbi Matalon told The Jewish Week that he considered the event "a real kiddush hashem," a sanctification of God's name.

As the focus during the final session pivoted to explore what next steps the community might take, a woman in the audience who lost her son to schizophrenia offered to counsel other families facing that diagnosis. An Orthodox woman from Teaneck, N.J., hoped the gathering would help sustain the not-always-consistent involvement of rabbinical leadership. Steinmetz reminded the participants that if each one of them would reach out and include one sufferer at their table, one by one the community could bring about transformation.

In his concluding remarks, Drisha's Rabbi Silber offered a plea and a prayer that no one feel he or she must walk alone or live in fear within a community newly committed to sharing the journey.