

Statistics (or, how my depression made me believe in G-d)

Ari Yovel, 5/28/18

When we first sat down as a group to discuss the theme for this service, we arrived on the topic of struggle- of raising our eyes to gaze upon mountains seen and unseen. Most members of the group, in our discussions, interpreted this theme through reflection on challenges from their past. However, as the youngest member of this group by at least two or three decades, I cannot look back on any meaningful struggle in my own life as being over and done with. I have only those that I am living through here and now, in every day and in each passing moment. That is the story I am here to tell.

Here are some things that I know to be true:

My name is Ari.

I use they/them pronouns.

I'm 23 years old.

I'm Israeli.

I'm a sophomore at Mills College.

I love dogs and am allergic to cats.

And I don't know what it feels like to not want to kill myself.

I first started thinking about ending my life when I was probably around ten years old. The notion that people could choose to die, and sometimes did, took firm root early on in the form of stories about self-sacrificing heroes and prisoners seeking escape. As a teenager, the thought of death as a means of release from heartbreak, anxiety, stress, and struggle retained its seductive appeal. This got particularly messy during my service in the Israeli Defense Force, given the combined powers of unprecedented stress levels and regular unsupervised access to guns.

In April of 2015, I was twenty years old, freshly discharged, and after the third night in a row that I actively had to persuade myself not to commit suicide, I told my parents that I needed professional help. I went to therapy. I got on antidepressants. I

started giving honest answers when people asked me how I was doing. I went on a lot of very long walks. I went to synagogue more. I started college. Piece by piece, I worked to separate my personal wants from those of my illnesses and to begin building a life that could work for me.

It never occurred to me until I started talking about it with others that not everyone lived this way- that is, to say, lived with a constant desire to die. However, I'm not the only one. My particular subspecies of depression is called dysthymia, or persistent depressive disorder. In layman's terms, it means that rather than having severe depressive episodes, my baseline mood is lower and the oscillations in my energy level are smaller.

Notice that I'm not talking about my mental health in past tense. This isn't a success story, largely because those stories have an end where the person tells you about how they're all good now, and contrary to nearly every story or movie made on the subject, that's not actually how mental illness works. There is no climactic moment in which a person "beats" the illness and it is then over. Rather, there is simply being "better"- better than you were a year, a month, an hour ago- and those are victories to be celebrated. I did not so much kill my inner demons as learn to live with them. I figured out my schedule and theirs and learned how to cohabit without destroying myself or anyone else in the process. Over time and with immense discipline and effort, I established rules, routines, strategies to cope, and self-care. My head is my house; I just happen to have the world's most obnoxious roommates, and they really enthusiastically want me to move out.

I believe in G-d. I believe that not only is He real, He really does care about human beings individually- myself included. I realize that bringing that up may seem like something of a non-sequitur, but I promise these things are related. As I started learning more about the invisible world of mental illness, I realized that pure statistics predicted that I would've died by now. All of the following things, statistically speaking, increase

my likelihood of attempting suicide: I'm queer, a military veteran, a survivor of sexual assault, a college student, and- of course- I'm mentally ill.

Mark Twain was a fan of stating, "There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics." **Statistically speaking, I should not be alive at this point. I've spent more than half the time I've been alive not wanting to be, and have had ample opportunity to act on that impulse. The only conclusion I can reach is that a power greater than myself wants me to stick around for some reason and, despite my fervent arguments against it, refuses to let me go.**

More than anything, I want you to know that I am not an outlier. There are countless people everywhere fighting countless battles each and every day, all while putting in an unimaginable struggle to appear "normal" so as not to bother or disturb those around them. I can guarantee that this applies to people in this room. If it's not you personally, it's someone you know- even if you don't know that about them.

It seems to me that as a society, we've been thoroughly educated to not speak about mental illness and addiction. They are discussed as an "over there" problem, happening to other people in other places, or at best they are private problems to be handled privately. The cultural and media debate around mental health only seems to rise to the surface after a terrible tragedy, and ultimately paints these issues as both unsolvable and dangerous. Worst of all, I've found that people would rather explain these problems away and not confront the depth of the issues that I and so many others face. So many times I've heard people instinctively try to explain why what that person is going through isn't that bad: "other people have it worse", "there's no reason for you to be upset", "get over it", "you're exaggerating", "toughen up".

Jews regularly talk about the importance of health and wellbeing. We pray for *refuah shleima* and hold in our hearts the people we know who are ill or wounded. We perform the mitzvah of *bikur cholim* and go visit the sick in their homes or in hospitals. We honor the precept of *pikuach nefesh* and make the sanctity of human life our highest

priority, something for which we are willing to fight and advocate with every breath. And yet, I know so many whose plights and struggles go entirely unnoticed even within our Jewish communities. There are patients in psychiatric wards who go their full course of treatment without a single visit. There are people whose depression prevents them from reaching out to loved ones desperately hoping someone will notice their absence and make contact. There are those battling addictions and substance abuse yearning for a friend who can support them compassionately and without judgment.

I'm here to remind you that these are not "other people" in "other places." They are your neighbors, your teachers, the baristas who make your morning coffee, your bus driver, your coworkers, your classmates, your cousins- or maybe they're you. And if it is you, know that I see you and I care.

The Jewish tradition gives us many important tools and values that may guide our action and response. *Lo tov heyot ha'adam levado*. It is not good for a person to be alone. It is fatal for a person to feel so alone that they cannot reach out for help. *Lo ta'amod al dam re'echa*. You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor. Reaching out to support those around you can save their life. *Kol hametzil nefesh me'israel ke'elu hitzil olam umlo'o*. To save a single life in the community is to save an entire world. When you support even one individual with a mental illness, you change their entire reality. You help them be a better child, parent, spouse, partner, and friend. Honestly, the full scope of the impact you make will never be known to you.

Here is a list of things that are true.

1 in 5 adults in the US lives with a mental illness, and roughly the same number for children between the ages of 13 and 18.

Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in adults and the 3rd leading cause of death in children in the US, taking nearly 45,000 lives a year.

For every one of those deaths, there are approximately 25 attempts.

Despite this, 60% of adults and 50% of teens report not having received mental health services of any kind in at least a year.

This stigma surrounding mental health is, statistically speaking, the greatest silent killer in the modern world. It is everywhere, sparing no community or demographic, and it can be fought. When we stand together with knowledge, compassion, and determination, we turn the one pair of eyes raised to the mountains to many. And it is when we look together that the mountain itself is not so tall anymore.