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Rabbi Ozer Glickman: Reflections of a Talmid

Ariel Rackovsky

In rabbinic literature, there is a debate about whether names are fair game for interpretation, whether we can be *doresh shemot*. Sometimes *Tanakh* explicitly links a name with the character of its bearer: Esav complains that Yaakov tricked him ("*ya'akveini*") twice; Naomi, whose name means "sweet," instructs the women of Bethlehem to call her "Marah," "bitter"; Avigayil says of her first husband, Naval, that "*ke-shemo kein hu*" (I Samuel 25:25), he is indeed the scoundrel attested by his name. Other times, it is more of an open question. Does Kayin's name, which implies acquisition and possession, shed light on his personality? Does his brother Hevel's name, which means "air" or "lack of substance," indicate that he was something of a *luftmentsch*, somewhat detached from the practicalities of the world? Are names not merely indicative but determinative?

I find myself returning frequently to the expression "*ke-shemo kein hu*" over the past month, each time I've reflected on the untimely passing of my teacher, Rabbi Ozer Glickman, on 3 Nissan 5778. However, in contrast to Avigayil's initial, pejorative application to her ne'er do well husband, I have been applying it in a wholly positive sense, as is common in Modern Hebrew. This is because the name Ozer, which means "helper," "aide," or "assistant" in Hebrew, perfectly describes him.

Other students and friends have written about the many facets of Rabbi Glickman's personality and scholarship. His remarkable mind and deep intellectualism all were dedicated to the service of diverse Torah and secular interests.While he had the soul of a poet— he was able to declaim poetry in English and French at will—his sharply analytical mind made him well respected figure in the business world (he was proud of being the only YU Rosh Yeshiva ever to have shared a private jet with Wayne Gretzky) where his advice on risk management was highly prized.

It was also this analytical mind that trained numerous students in his *Yoreh De'ah* shiurim, in which I participated in the academic year of 2003-2004, and his Business Ethics and Jewish Legal Theory classes at YU and Stern. However, Rabbi Glickman's teaching was not limited to covering material in the classroom. He trained his students to think, providing a conceptual framework within which to understand and apply otherwise abstruse ideas. He was a person of diverse interests, who could one moment analyze a *Shakh* in *Yoreh De'ah* and the next moment rave about the performance of his beloved Gunners in a recent match.

He was religiously committed to eclecticism as well: his background included stops in Columbia University, the Jewish Theological Seminary, Yeshivat Merkaz HaRav, the University of Toronto, and Rabbinic ordination from Rav Moshe Dovid Steinwurzel, the Bobover Rosh Yeshiva. He taught at the Metivta, the rabbinical school of the Union for Traditional Judaism, along his journey to YU and the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS). In his most recent iteration as the Facebook Rosh Yeshiva (a phenomenon described by Chaim Saiman), he interacted with a wide array of people and was comfortable with all of them, many of whom he never met and yet for whom he served as a Rebbe. And he was fearless; he used his Facebook platform to speak— often with nuance

alongside his customary sardonic wit— about a host of subjects others were afraid to touch, including Jewish racism, day school disciplinary policies, Orthodox materialism, and the current state of American Modern Orthodoxy.

All these are certainly important aspects of his character, but it is the *Ozer* in him that made him truly extraordinary, and that drew so many into his orbit. Rabbi Glickman was extraordinarily generous, and in several ways. As a successful executive, he no doubt gave generously from his wealth. Indeed, his platform in the Modern Orthodox community was, I believe, expanded due to the proven success he enjoyed in the business world. But Rabbi Glickman wasn't known for his charity, because he never sought recognition for his financial contributions.

He was generous with his time, giving freely of it to institutions on whose boards he served, to communities where he lived and taught, and to his many real and virtual students who sought his guidance. Rabbi Glickman was always available to anyone who wanted to engage with him, whether for a cup of coffee, a meeting, or a quick check-in on Facebook Messenger. A post by Lehrhaus editor, Elli Fischer, described Rabbi Glickman quietly tutoring a local youngster in Washington Heights for an exam. Rabbi Glickman also gave back to the community through singing; he was a masterful *ba'al tefillah*, with a sweet baritone and a consummate command of *nusah*, the traditional modes and melodies of prayer, who often led services during the High Holidays. He was generous in his fulfillment of Rashi's reading of Proverbs 3:9— "Honor God with your wealth *(mehonkha)*" as "*migronkha*— from your throat, such that if you've been blessed with a sweet voice, you should use it to honor God." (Rabbi Glickman's *tefillah* prowess was a reason why I especially reveled in his nickname for me in *Yoreh De'ah* shiur- "The *hazzan*".) He saw himself as a *sheli'ah tzibbur*, an emissary of the public, in other endeavors as well, especially as an activist. He was a tireless advocate on behalf of *agunot* and invested considerable efforts and resources to aid them in obtaining *gittin*, in which he succeeded on multiple occasions.

He was also eager to use his contacts to help former students and acquaintances advance or begin their careers. This was certainly true for his students who went on to careers in finance, but it was also true for those who went into other fields. In 2004, I left RIETS for what proved to be a brief period to begin dental school at the SUNY Buffalo School of Dental Medicine. Rabbi Glickman immediately put me in contact with relatives of his wife who lived in Buffalo, and put in a good word for me with the then-Rabbi at the Young Israel of Greater Buffalo.

Rabbi Glickman's generosity was especially remarkable because he was not thrilled that I was going to Dental School, though he never said this explicitly as it was never his way to force his advice on others. I only learned of his disapproval retroactively, several months later, when I dropped out of Dental School after one semester to return to RIETS. He told me then, as he would tell me many times subsequently, how glad and proud he was that I had returned to the path on which he thought I belonged. Finally, Rabbi Glickman gave relentlessly of his time for issues and causes that were dear to his heart, particularly when it came to injustices that he felt needed his attention.

In an age of cynicism and of the narcissism of small differences, Rabbi Glickman was refreshingly generous and effusive with his praise, and, especially on his Facebook wall,

always sought to publicly "embarrass" people whose writing he enjoyed, whose analytical skills he respected or whose integrity he admired.

It is this loss of an *ozer* that strikes so close to home, that leaves so many of us feeling bereft. Beyond his classroom lessons on *Yoreh De'ah* and *Hoshen Mishpat*, the ritual and monetary realms of *halakhah*, and beyond his efforts to bring a greater degree of justice to *Even ha-Ezer*, the realm of *halakhah* dealing with marriage and divorce, every encounter with him was a lesson in *Orah Hayim*, in the right way to live. Rabbi Glickman was a man of principle in an era when this is vanishingly rare, a man of profound Torah knowledge— but most importantly, he was accessible to us, his posts appearing regularly and him always a click or call away, ready to help and assist however he could.

May his memory be for a blessing.

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A Jewish Theology of Depression

Atara Cohen

As a rabbinical student, I spend much of my time immersed in text. The Jewish canon fundamentally shapes the way I interact with the world, other people, and God. I search for parts of myself in the books that I love in order to understand how I should live, how I should form relationships, and how I fit into the fabric of our tradition. I am able to feel the texts speaking to me, and thus I create my own textual identity.

Many Jews endeavor to find themselves in text as I do. However, people living with depression may have particular difficulty finding a textual identity that encompasses their whole being. Many of the religious texts that most obviously address depression suggest problematic attitudes towards mental illness. The texts that might be more inclusive and helpful require some creative reading to access. This means that those whose illness encompasses much of their lives may lack a textual, spiritual framework to understand their day-to-day lives. A friend asked me, "How am I supposed to bring my whole self into a relationship with God when depression shapes my lived experience?" This is my response.

One early and obvious religious approach to depression is that of William James, a philosopher and psychologist who studied various approaches to religious experience. He addressed the problem of the religious experience of depression directly in his seminal work on religion, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. His approach was influential enough that it has resonance in our language today. James outlines two fundamental religious outlooks: the "healthy minded" and the "sick soul." He argues that those who experience pain more easily than others also often experience religion differently than those who do not experience the same pain. James suggests that there is a way to "cure" the "sick soul." He describes the following process:

> To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities (James, 136).

This conversion can happen in any faith. It can be instantaneous or a long, drawn out process. However, once such a process has happened, one is able to see beyond the suffering of the world and reach an inner peace.

Although James writes from real experiences—he uses Tolstoy's experience in *A Confession* as an excellent example—in most cases the notion that there can be a religious "cure" for depression or any mental illness is terribly dangerous. James lived before modern therapies and medical treatments. Although we have made so much progress in understanding mental health, there are still those that believe that if they just adopt a different attitude, they may be cured. I know many people who were resistant to medical help because they thought that they could cure themselves. I have been told that "happiness is a choice." By suggesting today that one might be cured by having an attitude shift, people are discouraged from using the very real treatments that exist.

Thankfully, most people are no longer advised this way. At the same time, people still hold onto the problematic attitude that chronic mental health problems are something to be "cured." Some people who experience depression may have one episode and never experience the same symptoms again. However, most people who have a major depressive episode will have one at some point in the future. Telling these people that they can rid themselves of all depressive feelings is irresponsible and harmful. If a person believes that he or she can be cured, each and every negative feeling or the inevitable next episode become not only painful experiences but also experiences of failure. Feeling like a failure for mental illness can worsen an already difficult situation.

Instead of a linear framework of the "sick soul to converted soul" or the "mentally ill to cured," a more flexible framework of ups and downs is much more helpful. Using language such as "treatment," "coping," and "living with" rather than a language of trying to "solve the problem" can powerfully impact those who are depressed. While he does not use this language, Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav often writes about the pain of depression in a way that recognizes the often chronic nature of the illness. Many believe that Rabbi Nahman himself suffered from some sort of mental illness. For one experiencing depression seeking his or her place in the Jewish canon, Rabbi Nahman's work is an obvious place to look. His student Rabbi Natan writes in his name:

> For the nature of man is to pull himself towards black bile and depression, as a result of the wounds and happenings of time, and every man is full of affliction. As such, he must force himself with great strength to be joyful, always (Likutei Moharan II, 24).

Unlike James, Rabbi Nahman recognizes that coping with depression is a constant struggle that is usually not "cured." He understands personally the great effort it takes to be joyful. Rabbi Nahman also recognizes the physiological roots of depression, albeit with a dated scientific understanding. He believes that the illness stems from an excess of "black bile" which comes from the spleen. While not medically accurate, we can imagine that he would write similarly about an imbalance of serotonin in the brain. Depression is not to be "converted." Rather, each moment is an opportunity to turn it - with great effort - into joy.

Here, however, is where Rabbi Nahman's theory becomes dangerous. Though depression cannot be cured, it is, according to Rabbi Nahman, still "wrong." In the same passage, Rabbi Natan writes, "It is a great mitzvah to be happy always, and to empower oneself to distance the depression and the black bile with all one's strength."

Even as he admits joy to be a great struggle, Rabbi Nahman identifies it as a great *mitzvah*. In so doing, he puts enormous pressure on those who are suffering. For Rabbi Nahman, occasional joy is not enough; one must constantly fight one's natural inclination toward depression. This pressure and potential for guilt are unhealthy ways to live, especially for someone who has a tendency towards self-criticism. Such a way of thinking can become a positive feedback loop of self-blame: if I am not happy, then I blame myself, then I am even less happy, and then I blame myself even more.

Rabbi Nahman's complex theology of joy is quite alive today. People often sing his words at joyous Jewish occasions, "It is a great *mitzvah* to be happy always," unaware of how exclusionary this statement can be. Worse, a small number of religious authorities, even in the Modern Orthodox community, still see depression as a sin. One friend experiencing a particularly difficult episode sat through a class entirely on how the symptoms of depression were sinful and self-indulgent. I heard another rabbi call depression a "*yetzer harah*," an "evil inclination."

The approaches taken by James and Rabbi Nahman are particularly well-known, permeate the Jewish community's understanding of mental health, and are easy to find as resources for the seeker. However, both of these approaches can easily become dangerous. At the same time, our cannon is full of texts that can provide a sense of religious belonging and a framework for how to relate to God through depression, even if they are not about mental illness. Tehilim is particularly rich. Look at Psalm 13:

> How long, O Lord; will You ignore me forever?
> How long will You hide Your face from me?
> How long will I have cares on my mind, grief in my heart all day?
> How long will my enemy have the upper hand?
> Look at me, answer me, O Lord, my God! Restore the luster to my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death; lest my enemy say, "I have overcome him," my foes exult when I totter.

This psalm is full of the bitterness and sense of abandonment those who experience depression often feel. This text is not about depression per se, but the psalmist is expressing poignant emotional pain that resonates with many who are dealing with mental illness. This psalm, and other, similarly angry psalms, give canonical space to emotional pain.

This can be deeply meaningful to a reader experiencing depression. On one level, the reader is not alone because they see that they too can speak their pain to God. But even if they can't believe that God is listening, and even if they do not feel that they are delivered as the psalmist does, they are not alone because these texts are canonized. Not only did the authors thousands of years ago feel as they do, but their experience has been preserved by subsequent generations for millennia.

The text I believe is most helpful for the seeker experiencing depression is *Berakhot* 5b. There, the *gemara* has just concluded that sometimes God causes suffering not only as a punishment but because of love. Like William James' and Rabbi Nahman's frameworks, this too is an awful pastoral move. This can prevent people from letting go of their pain and can foster a twisted relationship with God. In a beautiful move, the *gemara* responds to and undermines this challenging position with a series of stories. The first is the most simple:

> Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba fell ill. Rabbi Yohanan entered to visit him and said to him: Is your suffering dear to you?
> Rabbi Hiyya said to him: Neither this suffering nor its reward.
> Rabbi Yohanan said to him: Give me your hand. Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba gave him his hand, and Rabbi Yohanan helped him rise.

Rabbi Hiyya and Rabbi Yohanan absolutely reject the traditional tannaitic belief that suffering is to be desired. We don't have to accept our pain, even if there is a supposed reward for the pain. We can choose to receive help and be healed.

In the following story, the roles are reversed:

> Rabbi Yohanan fell ill. Rabbi Hanina entered to visit him and said to him: Is your suffering dear to you? Rabbi Yohanan said to him: Neither this nor its reward.
> Rabbi Hanina said to him: Give me your hand. He gave him his hand, and Rabbi Hanina helped him rise.
> Why, let Rabbi Yohanan stand himself up!
> They say: A prisoner cannot free himself from prison.

This story helps us see that we have the permission to reject our suffering without Rabbi Nahman's pressure of being commanded to be joyful. This second story adds a crucial layer: Rabbi Yohanan cannot cure himself, even though he had cured his student. Very often, we cannot cure ourselves, even if we are the ones who normally help pull others out of suffering. While James and Rabbi Nahman suggest that treating depression is a solitary religious experience, here we see the importance of seeking the help that is almost always needed.

The final iteration of the story is the longest. Here Rabbi Yoḥanan visits one of his students again:

> Rabbi Eliezer fell ill. Rabbi Yoḥanan entered to visit him and saw that he was lying in a dark room. Rabbi Yoḥanan exposed his arm and light radiated from his flesh, filling the house. He saw that Rabbi Eliezer was crying.

The beautiful Rabbi Yoḥanan has the magical ability to glow, revealing Rabbi Eliezer crying alone in a dark room. While the story does not need to be read this way, it appears to me that Rabbi Eliezer is suffering from some sort of mental health episode because his emotional pain and illness are linked. Rabbi Yoḥanan logically asks:

> Why are you crying? If you are weeping because you did not study as much Torah as you would have liked, we learned: one who brings a substantial sacrifice and one who brings a meager sacrifice have equal merit, as long as one directs one's heart toward Heaven.
> If you are weeping because you lack sustenance and are unable to earn a livelihood, [as Rabbi Eliezer was, indeed, quite poor,] not every person merits to eat off of two tables, [one of wealth and one of Torah]. If you are crying over children [who have died], this is the bone of my tenth son.

While Rabbi Yoḥanan seems to want to help, he exemplifies terrible pastoral care. He answers for Rabbi Eliezer and does not allow him to speak. He invalidates every possible reason he can think of for why Rabbi Eliezer would cry. Eventually, Rabbi Eliezer retorts:

> Rabbi Eliezer said to Rabbi Yohanan: [I cry] over this beauty [Rabbi Yohanan] that will decompose in the earth. Rabbi Yohanan said to him: Over this, it is certainly appropriate to weep. Both cried. Meanwhile, Rabbi Yohanan said to him: Is your suffering dear to you? Rabbi Eliezer said to him: I welcome neither this suffering nor its reward. Upon hearing this, Rabbi Yohanan said to him: Give me your hand. Rabbi Eliezer gave him his hand, and Rabbi Yohanan stood him up.

Rabbi Eliezer makes a pointed comment about Rabbi Yoḥanan himself. Just like everything in this world, the beautiful Rabbi Yoḥanan will eventually become dust. To Rabbi Eliezer, the world is utterly bleak because even the most beautiful aspects of life will eventually decompose. With this, finally, Rabbi Yohanan listens and even agrees. He validates Rabbi Eliezer's pain and cries with him. However, after some time, he helps stop the pain. He again offers the option of rejecting suffering, and Rabbi Eliezer accepts.

These stories from the Talmud are useful in several ways. They give those struggling with mental illness permission to ignore the question of theodicy in regard to their illness. We

here have a model of what it means to believe that depression is neither a punishment from God nor a sign of God's love, and therefore we can work to overcome it.

Often we are attached to our thought patterns, but these talmudic stories encourage us to reject them. We can seek help and are not expected to cure ourselves alone. Finally, the stories in *Berakhot* give an outline for what help can look like: an empathic presence who validates one's pain and then helps the person suffering explore how to move past it.

When my friend first read this series of stories in the Talmud, she cried. She saw that the authors of the Talmud she loved so dearly understood her. She, emotional pain and all, were part of the tradition she revered. For the first time, she felt that God could love her as she was. Here I offered only a few of many ways she can contextualize her experience in a religious framework. I encourage others to feel comfortable finding their own.

Atara Cohen graduated Princeton University with a BA in Religion and a certificate in Judaic Studies, where she focused her non-academic time on interfaith work. After studying Torah in a variety of settings, including Midreshet Nishmat, Yeshivat Hadar, and the Drisha Institute throughout college, she began to study full time at Yeshivat Maharat. She was a fellow at T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights and now works at Columbia/Barnard Hillel as a rabbinic intern.