

It's Ok to Not Be OK

Sermon for Rosh HaShanah 5784

Rabbi Greg Weisman – Temple Beth El of Boca Raton

This month, the greatest returned to the top. Simone Biles, the GOAT, the greatest gymnast of all time, was back on the floor. With poise and showmanship, she perfectly landed an extremely difficult Double-Double. She was having fun, and on her last pass on the floor ex she hit a double layout and floated down to win her eighth US National All-Around Championship. It was a thrilling, triumphant return for Biles.

The last time she competed, it was a completely different story. It was two years ago at the Olympics, where she had the hopes of our entire country on her shoulders. How many medals would she win? Could she lead the US to the team gold? We never found out, because day after day she announced that she wouldn't be competing. She was derided by critics as being a quitter, of taking a spot on the team from someone who would have competed, even of costing the US the gold medal. But in the days and weeks that followed, it became clear what Simone Biles' reason for withdrawing was: her mental health.

Biles had been experiencing “the twisties,” a psychological reality that causes gymnasts and other aerial athletes to lose their orientation while in midair. Without instinctually knowing whether she was right-side up or upside down, the consequences of competing could be catastrophic. Overcoming the twisties was not something that a few extra sessions of training could do, because the cause in Biles' case was tied in with something deeper- her mental health. The extraordinary pressure to perform at the highest levels, combined with the trauma and abuse she had experienced at the hands of a predatory team doctor upended her mental state. It took two years of work for her to recover, and as the Washington Post editorial board recently put it, “Putting her mental health first, Simone Biles [stuck] the landing.”¹ She sacrificed potential historic glory to manage her mental health challenges, including anxiety and depression. What we learned from Simone Biles is that it's OK to not be OK.

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/08/28/simone-biles-national-championship-mental-health/>

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But Simone Biles is Simone Biles...and none of us are Simone Biles. We look up to her, but I'm more interested in the experience of everyday folks. I'd like to try an experiment. If your birthday is between January 1st and May 26th, please raise your hand...[look for hands to go up]...please keep your hands up take a look around the room. May 26th is the 146th day of the year, exactly two-fifths of the way through year. 2 in 5 is also the number of American adults who experience some form of mental health issue. The number of hands in the air represents a good estimate of the number of folks in this Sanctuary today who experience anxiety or depression. [Hands down.] Some of us have confronted this reality and are taking active steps to improve our mental health. But too many of us are not. The reasons are many, but my prayer for us, for this congregation and this community, is that this new year is the year we all are able to willing to name when we are not OK, and do the work to improve our mental well-being.

Imagine for a moment that all of those people with their hands in the air were walking around with open wounds or broken limbs, sneezing and coughing, or shivering with fever chills. If 250 people in this room were that sick or that injured, we would be telling our selves that something terrible is going on! We would want to rush them to hospitals and urgent care centers, desperately seeking to ease their pain and suffering. We would know that recovery from all of those wounds would take time, patience, medicine, and therapeutic treatments. We wouldn't expect them to just heal on their own. Alongside the clearly wounded might also be folks who have the nagging physical ailments, the sore muscles and joints, tight backs, and sensitive stomachs that decades of life can bring out. Having turned 40 this year, I can say this is something that I am learning to live with, and I imagine many of you are or have learned to, too. So, we do more stretches, buy antacids in bulk, and expect to need a day of recovery after a few hours playing pickleball. Being attuned to our physical limitations and ailments is something most of us do easily. But doing the same for our mental health is not. Injuries and illnesses to our mental health are just as real, and require just as much, if not more, attention. But for too long for too many, the pain and suffering of mental

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health challenges, of anxiety, depression, emotional trauma has gone undiagnosed, untreated, and, honestly, unacknowledged.

The American Psychiatric Association suggests that more than half of people with mental health concerns don't receive the support and treatment that could help them. Why not? For some it's challenges of access; they don't have the time, the money, or the ability to get time with a qualified professional, or some combination of all three. But for many, too many, the reason is simple: stigma and shame.² People are afraid to acknowledge that they might need some help. They are afraid of their friends turning their backs on them. They are afraid of losing their jobs if their bosses find out. They are afraid of people thinking less of them because they can't handle what life throws at them. The stigma around recognizing one's mental health concerns resonates with men, who are less likely to seek treatment because it conflicts with the strong, independent masculinity that is so prevalent in our society, and with women who have been socialized not to prioritize their needs in fear of being a bother to others. For fear of what others might think of us if we recognize the emotional pain we live with, feelings of shame push us to deny that we have it, put it out of our minds, and carry it subconsciously. We're simply too afraid to say that we need help, that we are not OK.

Even God struggles to admit to having emotions. Throughout most of our tradition, God is presented as all-powerful, mighty, infallible, all-knowing. On no day is that truer than today, *Rosh Hashanah*, *Yom HaDin*, the day of judgment. On this day, full of awe, we described and declared how God, who created us and entire universe, chooses and inscribes the fate of all of humanity and even the heavenly hosts, when we read the words of *Unetaneh Tokef*. It's deeply stressful for us, but we're told that God easily comes to these decisions about our fate. But in one passage of the Talmud, we get a glimpse of a God struggling with emotions. The prophet Jeremiah said "But if you will not hear it, my soul shall weep in

² <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/stigma-and-discrimination>

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Sermon for Rosh HaShanah 5784

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secret for your pride,”³ to which Rav Pappa, reminded us that other parts of the Hebrew Bible that describe God as full of majesty, of strength, of judgment, the God of *Rosh Hashanah*, seeming to suggest that sadness is not something that God ever experiences. But the rabbis of the Talmud pick up on the fact that God cries in secret. Usually, Rav Pappa is right, and God behaves in that unflappable fashion. But there are times when even God retreats into secret places to cry. The image of God sitting alone and crying in sadness can teach us that if its ok for God to push through the shame and stigma of anguish, of course we should do so too. If it's OK for God not to be OK, it's OK for us not to be OK.⁴

So, what do we do then, when we realize we are not OK?

God chose to sit alone and cry, but that's because God can't get a therapist. But we can. And it's easier now than ever before.

Before the pandemic, finding an affordable, available therapist was challenging. But with our society's newfound comfort with telehealth, resources like BetterHelp, which offers affordable virtual therapy appointments, or Grow Therapy, which matches patients with in-network therapists that take their insurance, access to therapy is easier than ever before. Wait times of weeks or months to see someone have turned into same-day and next-day appointments. Without access to therapy, too many people are relying on those closest to them, like a spouse or a best friend, to share the burden of the emotional and mental loads we all have. But now, not only is it easier to talk to someone online, but we are beginning to learn that teletherapy might even be more effective, in large part because it's so easy to access. We're able to get better quicker, and better quicker is better.⁵

³ Jeremiah 13:17.

⁴ For a wonderful lesson on this text, listen to Yehuda Kurtzer and Rabbi Benay Lappe's discussion in "A God Just Like Us," Episode 139 of the *Identity/Crisis* Podcast, published May 16, 2023. Available at <https://www.hartman.org.il/a-god-just-like-us/>

⁵ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s44220-023-00106-z>

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At the extreme of the mental health crisis, we have seen a steady increase in suicides across the nation. It's painful to think about or talk about, and sadly we have experienced suicide in our own congregation. But last summer the new 988 Lifeline debuted, a simple number to call or refer people to if they are having thoughts of suicide. Like 911, it is a number we should all know. 988. Hopefully a resource like this will prevent further tragedies, and you never know when you might have the chance to save someone's life by giving them that number.

Here at Temple Beth El, we are especially aware of the challenges that our kids and families face. For years we have developed our relationship with the Ruth and Norman Rales Jewish Family Services, providing social work support to our families, but this year, and credit goes to our temple's educator Heather Erez for making this happen, we now have a JFS social worker on site whenever religious school is in session, to support our students, their families, and our teachers.

Opening ourselves to our emotions, engaging in talk therapy, or asking a social worker for guidance are great things for confronting issues that have arisen. But the bigger question is why is this happening, why are so many more people experiencing mental health issues? While each person's story is unique, there is something that has come up over and over again: loneliness and lack of meaningful connections. Niobe Way is a world-renowned psychologist who has spent the last 35 years studying how a lack of relationships can have devastating effects on people's wellbeing. She put it bluntly: "The mental health crisis is a symptom. It's a symptom of the crisis of connection."⁶ Work like hers has shown that not having people we are close to and can count affects how we face life's challenges big and small. One study showed that people perceive a hill in front of them to be less steep if a good friend is standing next to them. Going back to the 1980s, research has shown that "people who had warmer, closer connections lived longer, developed the diseases

⁶ "Indictment 2.0 & The Loneliness Crisis (with Niobe Way)," episode of *Stay Tuned with Preet*, June 8, 2023. Accessible at <https://cafe.com/stay-tuned/loneliness-crisis-trump-indictment-niobe-way/>. NB: Dr. Way's interview was recorded in advance of the publication of the episode, which aired a few days after former President Trump's indictment, and neither the content of her interview or her work is political or partisan in nature.

It's Ok to Not Be OK

Sermon for Rosh HaShanah 5784

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of middle age, those chronic diseases, less soon and had better health longer on average than people who didn't have warm, close relationships.”⁷ As Niobe Way described it, “decades of research...have revealed the critical nature of relationships and communities...our social and emotional needs...are not simply feel-good issues; they are matters of life and death.”⁸

If building and maintaining bonds of connection to others is one of our strongest tools to maintain our mental well-being, then you are all in the right place. Being part of this community is literally life-saving. That's what this synagogue congregation is for. More than just holding worship services, or offering educational opportunities, this congregation exists to bring people together with love and compassion and deep connection to one another. Our Circles and Chavurot, Sisterhood, Brotherhood, Parenthood, Parent Tribe, our youth engagement efforts all exist so that everyone who is a part of this community feels that sense of safety and belonging. I know I speak for my colleagues in the clergy and the professional staff when I say that we wake up each day hoping that we can make you all feel better about your lives because of the experiences you have here. This is a place where we hope you feel great; but if you don't, we want to be there and help.

Rosh Hashanah is a day for wake-up calls. It is a day on which we envision the year to come and set a course for a year better than those that have passed. My prayer for all of us in this new year 5784 is that it be a year of health and prosperity. May we shed our shame and not fear the wounds we cannot see, so we can pursue health and well-being. May the blasts of the shofar remind and inspire us that when we feel that our mental health is in jeopardy, we should have the courage to say it's OK to not be OK.

⁷ Cited by Robert Waldinger, director of the Harvard Study of Adult Development, in “The Lonely American Man,” episode of *Hidden Brain* podcast, March 19, 2018. Accessible at <https://hiddenbrain.org/podcast/the-lonely-american-man/>

⁸ Niobe Way, Alisha Ali, Carol Gilligan, and Pedro Noguera, eds. *The Crisis of Connection: Roots, Consequences, and Solutions*. New York: New York University Press, 2018. Page 38.