

What If?

Rabbi PJ Schwartz

August 24, 2018

What if there were no stigma? I didn't start the week thinking that I would be asking this question tonight. Even on Wednesday, as I began to formulate my ideas for this sermon, I did not think I would be asking this question tonight.

Over the past 14 years, Jewish singer-songwriter Craig Taubman has thematically provided stories, anecdotes, and introspections during the month of Elul in his "Jewels of Elul" series. This particular year, all contributing writers were asked to respond to a simple question: "What if?" As Rabbi David Wolpe noted, the question of "What if?" allows us to explore what could be possible. Asking "What if?" can give us hope that our dreams can become reality.

But I did not anticipate that my question of "What if?" would become "What if there were no stigma?" I received a call yesterday from one of my students from Westport, Connecticut. And she was afraid—afraid to ask for help, afraid of what others would think, and afraid that she would be told that her feelings of depression and anxiety are simply her fault. What if there were no stigma? Would her fears be as strong?

If there were no stigma, perhaps she would be able to ask for help without feeling ashamed or as if she is less a person . . . without the fear of what people are really thinking about her . . . without the fear of people turning away from her. Perhaps

she would not have to choose between honesty and courtesy when answering people who ask how she is feeling. Perhaps she wouldn't be as secretive with her friends about her therapy and psychologist appointments. Perhaps she would be free from judgment . . . free to open up without an uncomfortable silence hanging in the air. It would mean freedom to be herself, the real and complete person she is. Perhaps she would not be defined by a label. Perhaps people would no longer say that she is depressed, but instead would say that she is a person who struggles with depression.

When will our “What if?” transform into “When?” And when will “When?” transform into “Now”? And if not now, when?

We can fight stigma by reminding people that their language matters. Once people understand how hurtful it is to label someone using an adjective that describes a mental health condition, it is relatively easy for them to refrain from using mental health conditions as adjectives to describe another person. In my experience, most people are willing to change how they use language once they learn how their language is problematic. We can fight stigma by acknowledging that we see a therapist. People say they have an appointment with their primary care doctor and feel no fear of being judged. Why don't we feel the same lack of fear when it comes to mental health professionals? We can fight stigma by not having stigma for ourselves—by not hiding from this world in shame, but by being proud of who we are, warts and all. We can fight stigma by choosing to live an empowered life. This means owning our story and refusing to allow others to dictate how we view ourselves or how we feel about ourselves.

I spoke with my student this morning. Even though she was afraid, she did find the courage she needed to seek help. While she was still afraid of what others might think, she did find the bravery to go to school. And while she was still afraid she would be told that her depression was her fault, she did find the strength to say, "It isn't my fault."

What if there were no stigma?

During this season of reflection and renewal, may we hear the calls of the shofar, which opens our hearts to strengthen our awareness of stigma.

May we feel empowered to reach our hands out to those who need more light amidst the darkness.

And may all of us feel safe, loved, and cared for, knowing that we are not alone.

For this and more, *Ken Yehi Ratzon*. May it ever be so.