



**SERMON EREV B'SHALLACH (MENTAL HEALTH SHABBAT):
THE BATTLE OF THE TROUBLED MIND**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Friday 7 February 2020
Manchester Liberal Jewish Community

I shall sing a song of a staged battle, devised in early antiquity;
Men of intellect conceived it in an arrangement of eight rows,
Each divided into eight stations on a slate.
Troops are deployed in the squared rows;
Commanders with their regiments poised for combat face each other;
They are ready for war whether advancing or encamping.
Yet, no sword is drawn throughout the fray; theirs is a battle of wits.
The steed races easily into combat, yet he chooses a winding path;
His movements are meandering and uneven, confined to three stations.
The king turns in all directions seeking to assist his subjects.
He is cautious in his forays whether at home or abroad in his camp.
In one campaign the Ethiopians prevail as Edomites flee before them.
Now the Edomites have the advantage; the Ethiopians and their king are
weakened from combat;
And yet, those mortally wounded will rise again
And once more they will do battle.

- 1 That poem was written by the great medieval Torah commentator and philosopher Abraham Ibn Ezra.¹ A very serious and scholarly character, he nevertheless found some leisure time to cultivate a talent and passion for chess.
- 2 Ibn Ezra was just one of many rabbis who were enthusiastic chess players. This posed a problem, though, because there are also a number of rabbis



who forbid chess – some forbidding it on Shabbat, some at all times. The general basis for this ban is ביטול תורה, a general rule against any frivolous or timewasting activity that keeps one from Torah study.

- 3 So how do we reconcile Rabbi Ibn Ezra’s chess obsession with the stream of legal decisions prohibiting it? Well, an 18th-century book of Jewish law called the *Birkei Yosef* has an interesting answer. “Rest assured,” it says, “that the great ones of Israel who played chess will certainly have been acting for the sake of heaven. Perhaps they suffered from the disease of blackness, and they played for the sake of healing, to divert their minds when they became anxious.”²
- 4 Like many Jewish texts, that line from the *Birkei Yosef* is in equal parts objectionable and inspiring.
- 5 It’s objectionable because it seeks to diagnose people with mental illness solely on account of the fact that they choose to do something slightly unusual with their lives. It’s objectionable because it supposes that great rabbis are always moral actors whose actions can inevitably be explained away, while laypeople would not be offered the benefit of the doubt. It’s objectionable because it relies on a wildly restrictive vision of Shabbat that doesn’t even begin to chime with our Progressive Jewish understanding of a day of rest.
- 6 But it’s also inspiring. It’s inspiring because it recognises that society and its rules must adapt to accommodate the needs of those suffering from difficulties with their mental health. It’s inspiring because even though its author believes chess-playing to contravene Jewish law, it still frames this in a religiously positive way – ‘for the sake of heaven’ – when done for the purpose of bringing some light into the darkness of depression.



- 7 The *Birkei Yosef* is just about the first text exploring how Judaism and mental health should interact.³ Many rabbis discussed the legal status of shotim, individuals who are totally mentally incapacitated and rely on guardians to manage their affairs,⁴ but consideration of mental health as it affects ordinary people going about their daily lives was strangely lacking.
- 8 That's changing now, and changing fast. As our understanding of mental health develops, so Judaism responds. Every new situation which life throws at us might have an obvious moral answer, but for those who want to live their lives according to a Jewish framework, Judaism needs to provide answers as well. The challenge is to provide a route through the fog of restrictions and prohibitions that will help support individuals through difficult times in their life.
- 9 A real-life, if bizarre, example from the contemporary work *Yalkut Yosef*:⁵ a wheelchair user spends a huge sum of money on a trained monkey which assists them with all sorts of vital daily tasks. Then, one Shabbat, the monkey escapes from his house and climbs onto a neighbour's roof. The disabled owner is distraught, not only unable to look after himself without the monkey's help but also despondent at the loss of companionship and of an expensive asset. They want to ask their neighbour to tempt the creature down with its favourite food (sweet beetroots: I promise I'm not making this up), and return it. But... it's Shabbat. And observant Orthodox Jews avoid touching animals on Shabbat as they are often associated with work.
- 10 Now, for me as a Progressive Jew – I suspect for all of us as Progressive Jews – this situation poses not the slightest dilemma. Ask the neighbour to grab the nearest jar of sweet beetroots. No question.



- 11 But an Orthodox Jew in that situation has a real problem. Because, distressed as they are without the monkey, the thought of violating the sacred precepts of their Judaism would add on another layer. For them, there was a need for a rabbi to find them a way to make it alright. Without that, their anguish would have been all the more intense.
- 12 The *Yalkut Yosef* ultimately ruled that it was acceptable for an observant Orthodox Jew to return the monkey, because to fail to do so would endanger the owner's mental health. He had some detailed legal reasoning that needn't detain us and which probably didn't detain the owner either; the important thing was that their Judaism found a way to recognise their situation and accommodate their needs. There were no assistance-monkeys in the Torah or Talmud, but the rabbis got there anyway.
- 13 For Progressive Jews, some of this may seem a little remote. But I think it should be empowering. On Mental Health Shabbat, we reach out. We ask ourselves what our communities can do to support those with mental health needs. In our case it might not be complicated halachic legal manoeuvres. It might be about making our events more inclusive. About ensuring that everyone has somewhere to go for Shabbat dinner. About giving someone a 'phonecall to ease their loneliness. Sometimes, it will be about giving someone space to be alone.
- 14 Whether or not Ibn Ezra's 'excuse' for playing chess was that he was depressed, he correctly recognised that the game is a מלאכת מחשבות, a battle of wits. But as well as 'wits' or 'plan', the word מחשבה can also mean 'a troubled mind'.
- 15 No doubt the *Birkei Yosef* was right that, for some people, an absorbing activity like chess can occupy a troubled mind. For others, their battle,



continues. And like the warriors on a chessboard, those of us on the outside of their darkness are often powerless to intervene. But on Mental Health Shabbat, we send out the message that, powerless or not, we are here. We are listening. The Jewish community recognises. The Jewish community cares.

Check against delivery.

GKW 07.02.20

¹ Leon J Weinberger. *Twilight of a Golden Age: selected poems of Abraham Ibn Ezra* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997): 125-127.

² Birkei Yosef, Orach Chaim 338:1

³ Ezra Cohen. "HaRofei LeShvurei Leiv: the contemporary Jewish legal treatment of depressive disorders in conflict with halakha" (dissertation: Brandeis University, 2018): <<http://bir.brandeis.edu/bitstream/handle/10192/36659/CohenThesis2019.pdf>>

⁴ See eg Hilchot Nachalot 10:8

⁵ Yalkut Yosef 308:6, para 25, n 29 (Shabbat vol 2)