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HELP

# SUICIDE: THINKING ABOUT THE UNTHINKABLE

**Rabbi Levi Avtzon**

*This article includes statistics and descriptions of personal encounters with suicide. I am not qualified to deal with the mental and sociological issues behind these terrible tragedies. I present here only my reflections on my experiences, and the lessons I've learned in my own life following those experiences, although I do believe and encourage that this topic should receive serious discussion and education within all communities, including ours.*

**Here is a disconcerting statistic:**

More people die in the U.S. from suicide than road accidents! Even more counterintuitive is that more people die from suicide than from homicide, terrorism and conflict combined!<sup>1</sup>

The statistics around the world aren't much different (with the exception that more people die from car accidents than suicide on a global level).

To quote one writer<sup>2</sup>: "Statistically, you are your own worst enemy. At least, of all the people in the world, you are most likely to be killed by yourself."

Consider as well that only 1 in 20 suicide attempts ends with death, which suggests that the numbers of people attempting death, or contemplating it, are much higher than we dare imagine.

<sup>1</sup> <https://ourworldindata.org/causes-of-death>

<sup>2</sup> Yual Noah Harari

# The Tanya says

that doing only good is within the power of every person. The well-known question is, if one time in a person's life he committed a sin and strayed from the path — even if it was unintentional — it means, as explained in *Igeres Hakodesh*, that his animal soul overpowered him. How can he later become a *beinoni*, which is defined, in Tanya's own words, as one who "never sinned and never will sin"? Not only will he not sin in the future; he never sinned in the past! Yet the Tanya says that every person can be a *beinoni*, and even more so, "Every person should strive for it—it is achievable for every person." The answer is as explained earlier: no matter a person's previous spiritual state, with *teshuvah*, he has everything he needs to transform it and become a *beinoni* in the future. Every person has this ability, and more so, "every person should strive for it." Notwithstanding your actions this very morning, and your state in the previous few days, with the power of *teshuvah* you can transform sins into merits, and what's more, even become a *beinoni*.

-Sichah of the Rebbe given on Chof Cheshvan 5745 (Nov. 20, 1984)

When I saw these data for the first time, I was shocked. It went against what I thought I knew of this world.

But data are data—impersonal and clinical—and so I stored it away in back of my mind without being too deeply affected by it. After all, what's it all got to do with me?

Then it happened. Within the past 12 months I have been intimately involved in the aftermaths of not one and not two but three devastating suicides. A woman in her 60s. A man at 50. And an 18-year-old young man.

I serve as a community Rabbi in Johannesburg, South Africa, and each of these tragedies impacted a community member of ours. It fell to me to do my best at offering whatever assistance I could for these devastated families.

Each episode was different. A loving grandmother and teacher. A successful businessman and father. A brilliant medical student. And the ways they died were different as well (I won't publicize the details).

But they all had three things in common.

1. They had mental illness (some diagnosed, others not).

2. They were deeply loved by all who knew them...

3. ...and yet, they all had a deep sense of unworthiness. They didn't feel love from others, but mostly they didn't feel love from themselves.

In scribbled notes and typed letters they wrote of a belief *that they don't deserve to be alive*, and that death was better than the life they led. Having spent countless hours with the families; looked into the eyes of devastated loved ones; stood at these funerals; tried to share words when all the words in the world seem hollow, all I can tell you is that *these horrible tragedies have*

*forever changed my outlook on life.*

First, it has made me aware of and sensitive to the deep darkness of severe mental illness. It is real, it is happening, and it is not just in my community. We cannot avoid it. The stigma must be put aside so that we can begin an honest conversation about this devastating reality in our midst. We dare not judge the victims and their families.

Second, it highlights—albeit, in an extreme fashion—a truism of life: We are our own biggest threat.

## YOUR OWN BEST FRIEND

Inversely, this must imply that *we are also our own most powerful ally*. We, with the help of Hashem, are the ones who hold the ultimate key to our ability to live meaningful life the way Hashem desires.

Although suicide and extreme mental illness are often outside one's control, most of us will deal with challenging situations which beg for a different response. And this is where the Moshiach Page begins. Together, and slowly, let us unpack this in an empowering way.

More than ever before in history we have the freedoms and opportunities to make decisions for ourselves and play our part in bettering our lives, the lives of other people, and the world. We have tools at our disposal that our grandparents would have considered no less than messianic.

And at the same time, more than ever we find people feeling powerless and unworthy. We find it across all ages but especially with the youth; more and more young people are feeling powerless to make decisions for themselves. How many kids feels like misfits because they don't excel in the three or four areas that schools celebrate

as achievement (academics, social, sports, appearance, etc.)?

There is a powerful narrative out there that the world is out of your control, and that you are unfit to live, love and accomplish. I remember my own adolescence and the debilitating feeling of not finding my place in this world. It felt as if the world judged for not finding my place, and then judged me when I embraced a place different than theirs. It's a story that even my adulthood hasn't fully erased.

### OUR GRANDPARENTS' PROBLEMS CAME FROM THE OUTSIDE

In previous generations, most of the threats that kept people up at night came from things outside their control: Communism. Nazism. Hunger. Infant mortality. Short life spans. War. Drought. Contagious, deadly illnesses.

In our day and age, while still in *galus*, our challenges, on the most part, are of a different ilk.

Dysfunctional family life. Addictions of many kinds. Distraction. Overeating (more people die today from overeating than from starvation!<sup>3</sup>) *Machlokes*. Self-doubt. Self-harm. People going off the derech. Older singles.

Of course, there were many personal challenges in their times as well, however, much of their heartbreak came from the outside. When the Cossacks are burning the house down, the other issues get swallowed up; at such a time, nobody is asking themselves if they are truly fulfilled.

In our time the issues are mostly of a personal nature. Yes, there are the anti-Semites, there is serious illness, and other events that are

beyond our control, but the majority of the broken hearts were broken by our own poor life-choices or those of our loved ones.

It's not Stalin's fault that we haven't spoken to our sibling in ten years. Our phone addiction cannot be blamed on the Apple. Our overeating is our problem, and ours alone.

Let me clarify that I am not saying that there are easy answers to the problems of today. Addiction is a real issue. Extreme mental illness is not simply overcome by willpower. And some are victims of terrible abuse and its ramifications which are sometimes permanent.

What I am saying is that for the majority of suffering people there is a simple yet terrifying fact that we are all too often forgetting: We were given the abilities and liberty to do better. The destructive stories we tell ourselves of unworthiness and not fitting in are our own worst enemy. In the extreme they lead to death itself. In the less extreme they lead to death of potential, of dreams and of passionate Yiddishkeit.

A tzadik used to advise a person to keep two slips of paper in his pocket. The slip in one pocket should read, "The world was created for my sake." The slip in the other pocket should read, "I am but dust and ashes." Reading both slips, at different times, as needed, would keep the individual balanced and properly focused in life. In this generation, especially with the preponderance of mental illness, it seems there are many who need to study "the world was created for my sake" far more often than the slip in the other pocket.

### BRINGING THE GEULAH

When the Rebbe officially accepted the *nesius* on Yud Shvat 5711 he held a now-famous and transformational *farbrengen*. Numerous ideas were shared as the Rebbe laid out his mission statement for the final generation of *galus* and the first of *Geulah*.

Here's how the Rebbe concluded his first *maamar*, *Basi Legani*:

*Fellow Jews, listen now!*

*Traditionally, Chabad has demanded that every individual do his own avodah alone, instead of relying on the Rebbeim. This is the difference between the Polish school of Chassidus and the Chabad school of Chassidus. The former school has a non-literal interpretation of the verse, וצדיק באמונתו יחיה – "And a tzadik lives with his faith": "Do not read yichyeh but [in the causative mode] yechayeh." ...it is the tzadik who gives life to all those who are bound to him.*

*We of Chabad, however, all have to do our own work alone, with all the 248 organs and 365 sinews of the body and with all the 248 organs and 365 sinews of the soul.*

*The Sages teach: הכל בידי שמים חוץ מיראת שמים – Everything is in the hands of Heaven except for the fear of Heaven. I am not (G-d forbid) withdrawing from giving help to the degree that one's capabilities allow. However, since everything is in the hands of Heaven except for the fear of Heaven, then if there is no independent individual avodah, what can be gained from giving out manuscripts [of Chassidus], singing niggunim, and saying l'chaim?*

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3 Ibid

# Adam left a letter, and in his last act on this world he offered his loved ones the gift of closure. Bringing a drop of sense to the senseless.

*The Rebbe [Rayatz] used to warn chassidim against self-delusion. Every individual chossid himself has to transform the folly of the Other Side [i.e., of the forces of evil] and the seething energy (“koch”) of his animal soul – to kedushah.”<sup>4</sup>*

In ensuing decades, the Rebbe would share this idea in many forms, the most famous on 28 Nissan 5751, where we were called upon to take ownership to bring the *Geulah* within ourselves and for the world at large. [Visit [nsheichabadnewsletter.com](http://nsheichabadnewsletter.com) home page to see a video excerpt of the Rebbe saying this. -Ed.] The Rebbe would often use the term עבודה בכח עצמו – doing the work with one’s own strength.

In today’s vernacular we could call this “self-empowerment” or “taking ownership” or “sense of agency.” Essentially, what we are being told to do is to grab the bull by the horns. It’s in our power. Do whatever we can. *Do*.

Let’s be our own best friend. Let’s reveal the *Geulah*. We have the power.

## EULOGY FOR ADAM

I mentioned earlier about the suicides that took place recently within my community. I was asked to give the eulogy for the 18-year-old boy, Adam, whose death shook the entire Johannesburg Jewish community. It was the hardest speech I have ever had to give, but it also came from the deepest place within me, a place of the deepest truth and most aching pain. This was the conclusion:

*Who was Adam? He was a brilliant, kindhearted and determined young man with a sharp sense of humor. He was a top achiever with seven distinctions, one of the top students his age in the entire country, and a first-year medical school student. He had a large group of close and dear friends who were together since pre-school and who loved and respected Adam.*

*Adam had the most doting and loving parents any child could dream of and a younger sister who simply adored him.*

*This doesn’t fit the profile of someone who would give up on their future. It doesn’t make sense. It will never make sense. Adam left a letter, and in his last act on this world he offered his loved ones the gift of closure. Bringing a drop of sense to the senseless.*

*In his letter he shared the story of a whole different Adam. The image of himself that he had created in his own mind. You see, Adam loved fiction, and he must have been very good at it, because Adam created in his mind a fictional story of who he was. In his own mind Adam was never good enough. He wasn’t successful enough, he wasn’t handsome enough. Adam suffered from very low self-esteem and in fact he hated himself and who he [believed he] was.*

*Despite the mountains of love that surrounded him he lived in a valley of self-hatred and darkness. Despite all the ropes that would be thrown to him in a heartbeat had he just reached out, he believed that death was easier than admitting to himself and to the world: I am different. I don’t fit the mold.*

*Adam told himself a story that life needs to be perfect, and if not then it’s not worth the fight. If I can’t live the picture-perfect future then I am unworthy of love, of connection, and even of life.*

*Oh, Adam.*

4 Translation taken from Proceeding Together by SIE

# Life Help

**In 2001, the then-U.S. Surgeon General said: “Suicide is our most preventable form of death.”**

In recent months, I’ve had the privilege to work with some amazing people on a youth suicide prevention initiative on behalf of the Rohr Jewish Learning Institute (JLI). Our goal is to save lives by training *shluchim* to become mental health first responders and suicide gatekeepers in their communities and providing Torah educational materials to engage youth groups in discussions about mental health and suicide prevention.

In the course of doing research for the program, I learned that the key to preventing suicide is more in the hands of us laypeople than it is in the hands of professionals.

The average person is not a licensed therapist or counselor to offer treatment, but everyone can help save a person from suicide by being there for them, giving them hope, and helping them get professional intervention.

People tend to believe that suicide is unstoppable, that intervening will only make things worse, and that only experts should get involved. The truth is if people get the help they

with a serious or terminal illness. Sudden loss of freedom or fear of punishment. Anticipated loss of financial security. Loss of a beloved therapist, counselor, or teacher. Fear of becoming a burden to others.

**Step 1:** If you suspect suicidal thoughts, **ask them directly** about it: “When people are as upset as you seem to be, they sometimes wish they were dead. I’m wondering if you’re feeling that way too?” “You look pretty miserable, I wonder if you’re thinking about suicide?” “Are you thinking of killing yourself?”

How you make them feel is key to getting them to open up to you. Be supportive.

**Step 2: Listen** to the problem and give them your full attention. Remember, suicide is not the problem; it is only a “solution” to a perceived unsolvable problem. Do not rush to judgment. Offer hope in any form.

**Step 3:** Persuade them to **access help**. Ask: “Will you go with me to get help?” “Will you let me help you get help?” “Will you allow me to call the lifeline for you?”

People considering suicide may not be able to get professional help on their own. When offered a viable option to live, people will almost certainly agree and find great relief in the hope it provides, so don’t hesitate to get involved and take the lead.

1. Provide reassurance. Tell them: “I want you to live.” “I’m on your side, we’ll get through this together.”

2. Follow your gut feeling. If you think the person may act on his/her thoughts of suicide, call 911 or offer to take them to the nearest emergency room.

3. If you do not think that immediate help is needed, provide them with contact information for the *Suicide Prevention Lifeline* or *Crisis Text Line* [See sidebar “Resources.”]

4. Get others involved. Ask them who else might help. *Mashpia*? Family? Friends? Rabbi?

5. Offer to work with whoever is going to provide counseling or treatment.

6. Follow up with a visit or a phone call to let the person know you care about what happens to them.

Remember that hope is the key to preventing suicide. You can be the source of that hope, and by doing so, **you may save a life.** ❧

*Rabbi Zalman Abraham is the director of marketing and strategic planning for JLI. Special thanks to the director of the Suicide Prevention Center of New York, Sigrid Pechenik, PsyD, for reviewing this article.*

## How to Identify and Respond to Those Struggling With Suicide

**RABBI ZALMAN ABRAHAM**

need they will probably never be suicidal again. Asking them directly and compassionately about suicidal intent lowers their anxiety, opens up communication, and lowers the risk of an impulsive act. This means that everyone can prevent suicide.

Here’s what you can do. Listen and look out for what people around you are saying, what they are doing, and what’s going on in their lives. Take the following warning signs seriously:

**Verbal Clues:** “I wish I were dead.” “I’m tired of life, I just can’t go on.” “My family would be better off without me.” “Pretty soon you won’t have to worry about me.” —any comment that suggests that they are considering ending their lives.

**Behavior clues:** Previous suicide attempts. Acquiring a gun or stockpiling pills. Co-occurring depression, moodiness, hopelessness. Putting their personal affairs in order. Giving away prized possessions. Suddenly becoming very religious or completely disinterested in religion. Substance abuse or relapse after a period of recovery. Unexplained anger, aggression, and irritability.

**Situational clues:** Fired from a job or expelled from school. Forced to move. Lost a major relationship. Lost a spouse, child, or best friend (especially by suicide). Diagnosed



*Mom and Dad didn't love you because you were perfect. They loved you because you were you, no matter who you turned out to be. The countless friends your age, and friends of your parents who embraced you all these years, would have accepted you no matter who you turned out to be.*

*But you knew that, Adam. The problem wasn't with others. Your challenge was that you would not accept yourself. You had love for everyone else but yourself. They could accept you, but you would never accept that life would not turn out exactly as you needed it to. You strove for perfection, which brought you so much success in life, yet blurred your vision of how beautiful your life truly was and would continue to be had you not ended it.*

*Adam, your family and friends are committed to make sure that your death will not be in vain. They are passionate to bring some form of meaning to this unbearable tragedy. They want each young man and woman to know:*

*You are good enough! We love you! We need you! Don't only share your inner light outward to others; bring some light into*

*your own darkness of self-doubt and despair.*

*Hashem created each and every one of us different. We have incredible strengths and challenging weaknesses. Angels are perfect, humans are not. That's by design and so it is by each of us.*

*No matter who you are and what your challenges are, you are worthy of love. You deserve to be alive. You have earned the indelible right to self-love and respect. You are good enough to be here. We are all good enough to be here. We are all loved by Hashem, unconditionally.*

*Adam, I don't know if these few words would have been enough for you to change your mind, but I hope and pray that at least one person here who is consumed with self-loathing will decide to change their inner story. They will decide to trust in their loved ones and share their struggles. They will reach out to others who will hand them a rope to climb out of the darkness.*

Dear N'shei Chabad Newsletter readers, we stand on the threshold of the Geulah and in these last moments of galus we have been

given tools and miraculous opportunities to make the Geulah happen. Let us not allow the yetzer hara of our time—self-loathing—to hinder our efforts.

Geulah comes to the world when we bring it to ourselves. It's very individual work that demands self-belief and self-empowerment.

On the other hand you have a generation of people feeling unworthy and incapable of doing their part.

It's almost as if the yetzer hara of our time is specifically here to hinder our efforts to bring the Geulah into our world. All he needs to do is tell us we are nothing and worthless and the work comes to a standstill.

Let us not fall into this destructive trap. We are here for a reason.

You and I are the right people at the right time, with all the right opportunities to bring ourselves and the universe into the light. ❧



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**Free confidential crisis intervention** via SMS message is available 24 hours a day, every day throughout the U.S., UK, and Canada and can be reached by texting HOME to 741741, 85258, or 686868 respectively.

**The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** is a United States-based suicide prevention network that provides a 24/7, toll-free hotline available to anyone in suicidal crisis or emotional distress. Call 800.273.TALK (8255).

**JLI will offer first-responder training to shluchim,** teens, and college students alongside Torah educational

programming to help people make sense of their inner struggle and develop healthy self-esteem. The program is being offered in partnership and with the support of the best clinical experts in the field of teen suicide prevention, including Didi Hirsch Suicide Prevention Center, S. Lukes Hospital Network, a top psychiatrist from the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the president of the American Association of Suicidology (ASA), a world-renowned researcher in teen suicide prevention, and the director of suicide prevention for NY State (SPC-NY).