

Reclaiming the Body: Anorexia and Bulimia in the Jewish Community

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"To save one life is to save the world"
– Inscription on the gift to Otto Shindler

Eating disorders are taking their toll on the Jewish community. Once thought to be a passing fad, anorexia, bulimia, binge eating, excessive exercising and a constant worry about food, fat, calories and weight are here to stay. Why has this happened? And what can we do to understand, prevent, and heal this epidemic?

No one theory explains the development of eating disorders. The cultural emphasis on thinness certainly is a factor; yet, the roots of eating problems are far deeper than this. While all women are subjected to a constant bombardment of unrealistic media images, only a small percentage develop diagnosable eating problems. And so, we must look beyond and beneath the impact of the media.

Eating disorders are, in fact, triggered by a variety of factors such as peer and family issues, chemical imbalance, or traumatic events, including emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. They can occur at any point throughout the lifecycle, but onset is most often in adolescence when teens and young adults are faced with a host of physiological changes, emotional pressures, and social demands. And unfortunately, they do not discriminate based on age, gender, socio-economic status, or religious group.

Ultimately eating disorders have more to do with coping with difficult internal thoughts and feelings than with the external size or shape of one's body. While they might appear to be about weight and food, these symptoms are only the tip of the iceberg. At its core, an obsession with weight is a way to deal with unacceptable feelings, moods, and thoughts by keeping obsessive "fat thoughts" and food-related behaviors in the forefront of consciousness. In this way, eating disorders both reflect and mask inner pain.

Jewish Vulnerabilities

While women from all countries and cultures develop eating disorders, Jewish women face unique challenges and vulnerabilities. Here are some considerations:

The role of food and mealtime in Jewish life: From fasting on Yom Kippur to over-eating on Shabbat and Passover, a cornerstone of Jewish identity has always been rituals that involve family meals. For Jews, food has always had multiple meanings of survival and resilience. Unique Jewish dishes celebrate the cycles of life, and mealtime itself tells

the story of Jews as a persecuted, migratory people. Often forced by pogroms to leave their homes on a moment's notice, only what could be carried on one's back was taken. A pair of candlesticks and a tablecloth might be all that remained of their vanished lives. Mealtime, then, was symbolic of resiliency in the face of persecution. Even today, for many Jews, saying a blessing over bread and wine evokes memories of loss and hope, while simultaneously celebrating the continuity of life itself. Thus, the central role food plays in Jewish life creates a compounded vulnerability for Jewish women for whom food has both a literal and a deep symbolic meaning.

Genetic predisposition: Like all Americans, Jews are exposed to pervasive media images pressuring women to achieve an unrealistically thin body. For Jewish women, whose genes predispose them to being short and stocky, rather than lean and lanky, making peace with one's body is especially challenging.

The Orthodox Community: Orthodox women face special risks because their lives are often defined by strictly prescribed roles. They are under great pressure to marry early, and arranged marriages, immediate childbearing, and large families are the norm. For young girls who are unprepared to start families, anorexia is a means to delay puberty, put off child bearing, and gain control of their bodies when their lives are out of their control.

Assimilation: Dieting as a ritual of female identity. All people develop a personal identity based on a need for uniqueness and group affiliation. Many Jews struggle with the tension between assimilating into mainstream American culture while at the same time retaining a sense of Jewish identity. This tension can be somewhat eased through dieting, which has become a rite of passage for all mainstream young women. Excessive food restriction may also express the need to rebel against one's Jewish heritage and genetic endowment, or separate from a family that centers itself on food and eating.

Shame. For many Jews, acknowledging psychological problems such as addictions, depression, and eating disorders carries a stigma. Often sufferers and their families keep their problems secret and avoid seeking psychotherapy until problems reach a dangerously severe level. Early identification and treatment are crucial to healing.

Re-enacting Holocaust trauma: Dieting and eating disordered behaviors can be an expression of unconscious pain buried deep in the past. Consider eighteen year old Rebecca, who developed anorexia. It took many months of therapy before she became aware that her own feeling, "being unworthy to live" came from an unconscious identification with her maternal grandmother, lost in the Holocaust.

Rituals of Renewal: How Jewish Practices can Heal

Embracing the concepts of courage, compassion, and empathy, Judaism is filled with healing rituals. Here are some that may offer spiritual nourishment for individuals suffering with eating disorders:

The ***Metaphor of the Mishkan***: People with eating disorders are disconnected from themselves, others, and the universe. They need a safe place to reconnect and heal. A therapy office can be conceptualized as a *mishkan*, a “sacred dwelling place,” where they can reclaim the parts of themselves lost to the relentless pursuit of thinness. There, they will also be reminded that their bodies are sacred, and that healing involves reclaiming the body as a *mishkan*—a sacred dwelling place for the soul.

The ***Mi Shebairach***: The words of this prayer for healing poignantly remind us, “Help us find the courage to make our lives a blessing.” Many people who suffer from eating disorders benefit from being using these words as daily affirmations, which can be a source of deep spiritual nourishment.

Rosh Chodesh: In contrast to the numerous rituals celebrating the male lifecycle, (circumcision, bar mitzvah), few rituals in Judaism celebrate the seasons of a woman’s life. In the past few decades, Rosh Chodesh groups have revived the ancient ceremony celebrating the new moon, where both new rituals are created and neglected ones are recovered. Some groups celebrate biblical women such as Judith and Miriam, others invent new rituals to celebrate unique aspects of women’s lives, such as pregnancy, labor, and childbirth, and to grieve losses such as miscarriages and divorce.

Holy Sparks: The kabbalah teaches us to search for our shattered sparks, those parts of us we have lost. This concept is particularly useful for people struggling with eating disorders. The words of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov can be used a mantra or an affirmation: “As long as a tiny flame remains, a great fire can be rekindled.” The mystics believed that we attain wholeness by finding our holy sparks, our inner resources.

Storytelling: Jews have always had a deep respect for storytelling. Each year Jews read the Torah from cover to cover, always certain that each rereading will offer new meanings. Passover, the holiday most celebrated by Jews worldwide, is based on the retelling of the story of freedom. Like Judaism, psychotherapy is based on the principle that each time a person tells his or her story, new meanings are revealed. Telling one’s story—to one’s therapist, family and friends—helps sufferers find the hidden meaning contained in eating-disordered behaviors.

Forgiveness: The practice of *selichot*—asking forgiveness for those we have harmed—usually occurs between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, but it can be practiced anytime. This practice teaches that if one asks for forgiveness three times from someone one has harmed, forgiveness must be granted. It reminds us not to hold grudges and to let go of anger. One of the final steps of recovery, then, might involve asking for forgiveness—from oneself. People with eating disorders tend to be perfectionists and often have great difficulty with this task. The ritual of *selichot* can be used to encourage self-forgiveness.

Conclusion

"The world breaks everyone and afterwards, some of us are strong in the broken places."
— Ernest Hemingway

Judaism teaches people to celebrate life, value the present moment, and honor “what is” as both whole and holy. Learning to accept oneself “as is” is at the essence of healing. An old Hassidic teaching tale reminds us of this lesson. On his deathbed, an ancient scholar, Rabbi Zusya spoke to this point. “In the coming world, they will not ask me ‘Why were you not Moses?’ They will ask me, ‘Why were you not Zusya?’”

Healing from a problem with food involves accepting our limitations and vulnerabilities as well as our strengths and our resources. It also involves accepting our woundedness, knowing that we always can grow and become strong in the broken places.

The unexpected gift of being a therapist is that when my patients grow, I grow. This is the essence of *tikun olum*: we are all always repairing a communal brokenness.

This essay was excerpted from a chapter written by Judith Ruskay Rabinor, PhD in the book, *Jewish Choices, Jewish Voices*, edited by Elliot Dorf and Louis Newman. Dr Rabinor is the Director of The American Eating Disorder Center of Long Island and the author of *A Starving Madness: Tales of Hunger Hope, and Healing in Psychotherapy* (Gürze Books, 2002).

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