

We are commanded on Shemini Atzeret to experience joy. This is a funny commandment. Can such things be commanded? The challenge of feeling joy on the holiday is exacerbated by the pall the COVID casts over us.

Since the COVID crisis began in March, many of us have experienced depths of sadness that we did not expect. Throughout society, depression has become an unfortunate part of many people's lives. With our routines obliterated and our movement circumscribed, we may not be able to maintain that pep in our step that we are used to.

And that is fine, and it needs to be acknowledged that that is fine. Depression is part of the human experience. Feeling depressed because of a pandemic is not at all odd. While our society has made significant strides in terms of lifting the stigma from mental health, it still has more work to do. If we feel depression we should not feel ashamed and believe we have to hide our condition or ourselves from other people.

Depression is a frightening experience not just for those who experience it but for the loved ones surrounding the depressed person. The loss of interest in activities and pursuits that characterizes depression can startle family members or friends. What is important is that as friends and family members, we make sure to destigmatize their condition so that they don't feel like they are hiding. If we ourselves are the depressed person, we have to be diligent about telling those close to us how we are feeling even if we would rather not admit that we have entered such a painful personal morass.

Depression, of course, is not only environmental, it is also genetic. An environment like the one that COVID creates can exacerbate pre-existing genetic dispositions for depression, so we have to be extra cautious during this time. There's a positive side to depression having a genetic component. It can be addressed through medication. Part of the stigma surrounding

mental health is the stigma around medication. Some believe that they can will themselves through depression and view taking medication as a crutch. We are fortunate to live in a world in which science and medicine have developed numerous treatments for treating depression, and we should take advantage of these innovations to heal ourselves.

Because the brain is so central an organ in our body, we tend to associate our very selves with our brains. We think that taking medication is a sign of weakness, but actually seeking medical help is a sign of strength. Sometimes we need help, and the best help that we can get comes in the form of a pill. In truth, though the brain is the body's most splendid organ, it is an organ like any other. Just as any one of us would use medication to treat a problem with our kidney or pancreas, so too should we use medication to treat the brain.

Let's return to the commandment of joy. The purpose of what I have said so far is to make clear that what this commandment may demonstrate is that at times we are powerless to feel joy. Even when we know that the season and the day speak to that important emotion, we may not be able to feel it.

My overall message to you then today is that we should seek to experience joy on this day – Shemini Atzeret – especially because it coincides with Shabbat, but the commandment to feel joy may make us aware of feelings we are experiencing that qualify as depression. If you are depressed, reach out to me or your friends or loved ones and let them know how you are feeling. I am here to help you find the right care that will enable you to return to your regular self. We may not be able to live normal lives under COVID, but we can certainly take steps – such as seeking therapy and medication – that allow us to avoid the pitfalls of what is a most common and painful illness.

By all means, pray that your depression lifts, but remember that God helps those who help themselves. If we only pray but don't seek mental health help, then we're not giving God the full chance He needs to be able to heal us. Most importantly, don't tough it out. Don't see what you're going through as some test of your strength or resolve. The true strength comes from being able to ask for help when needed.