



## From Blame and Shame to Cherished Belonging

*After the death of a beloved child in our community to suicide, we reaffirm our commitment to combatting shame with tenderhearted love, to meeting one another in the dark, to never giving up on each other. May Benjamin Ellis's memory be a blessing.*

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I want to tell you about one of my best friends in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, Carey. She had a crazy laugh that always made *me* laugh, and she wore her curls with pride even in New Jersey in the 80s when none of us really knew what to do with our hair. We'd pass notes back and forth in the hall all day, and talk on the phone for hours each night.

One day, Carey wasn't in school for one, then two, then three days in a row. My friends and I called her house many times to check in on her. Her parents finally told one of us that she was sick and in the hospital, and couldn't talk. After six weeks, she returned, almost as if nothing happened.

The next year, in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, she disappeared again, again for six weeks. And then again. It was at this point that I first heard people whisper the dreaded words: *attempted suicide*. But nobody spoke of it out loud—not the parents, not the school, not Carey herself. When she came back to school, after the third hospitalization, she was diminished. The parents all talked about whether it was safe to have us hang out at her house. I think they worried her condition was contagious. We still spent time together, but she grew more and more reclusive. And over time, we just grew apart.

I don't know what happened to Carey. I don't know if she went on to overcome whatever she was wrestling with and live a full and flourishing life or if she continued to struggle with suicidal ideation. I asked a few friends from back then, and none of us know what happened to her. She just kind of faded from the world.

It has been ten days since our community and extended circles have been rocked by a profound tragedy, the death of Benjamin Ellis, a 15-year-old boy who grew up at IKAR, and became bar mitzvah right where I am standing just a year and a half ago. During these days, which were intended, by the Jewish calendar, to be *zman simhateinu*—days of great joy—a reverberative anguish has swept through our extended community.

I want to tell you a little bit about Benjamin. He was kind and loyal. He had the rare presence of mind and strength of spirit to be exactly who he was, no matter who was looking. He had

parents and siblings who cared deeply for him, and did and would have done literally anything in the world for him. He had good values. He had good friends at school and at camp. He loved animals and cooking and flying drones. He stood up to bullies and sat with friends when they were struggling. He had a moral backbone.

For all the horror that such a person was taken from this world, we have to add one more confounding detail: Benjamin died by suicide. This was, as his father Peter called it, *the suicide that just destroys the world*.

So here we stand, on the shabbat in which we celebrate the creation of the world, to talk about suicide... and the worlds that it destroys. I speak about this today with Peter and Nanci's blessing—as their deepest prayer is that no other child, no other family, suffer as they are now.

As I have navigated the sadness and confusion of the past week and a half, I find myself drawn back to Carey, and to my introduction to suicidality, when I was just the same age as Benjamin and his friends.

For one thing, I'm deeply and painfully aware, especially as a mother of three (including my own 15-year-old boy), of how much harder it is, in many ways, to be alive today than it was when I was growing up.

Sometimes it really feels like the algorithm is conspiring to convince us that the world is just not meant to be lived in.

Between Jonathan Haidt's book *The Anxious Generation*, and Andrew Solomon's seminal New Yorker piece just last month, [\*Doom Scrolling\*](#), we are right now, in many ways, in the midst of a great awakening to the dangers of the technologies and habits of our time.

Research now points to “a sudden and very large upturn in major depressive episodes” among American teens over the past decade and a half (Haidt), and a significant rise in incidence of suicide among Americans between 10-24 years old (Solomon), with higher than typical rates among LGBTQ teens. Haidt calls this *The Great Rewiring*—the nearly instantaneous normalization of a largely unregulated social media landscape that was purposely designed to maximize profit by maximizing addictiveness.

We know that most American teens spend at least four hours a day on social media, and that “social media acts on the same neurological pleasure circuitry as is involved in addiction to nicotine, alcohol, or cocaine.” One behavioral expert at Harvard compared the effect to “putting children in a 24-hour casino and giving them chocolate-flavored bourbon.” Meanwhile, data scientists can now show that “when depressive content is good for engagement, it is actively promoted by the algorithm” (Solomon).

Our mental and emotional wellness has been systematically obliterated. I remember years ago sitting with a dear friend—a grown up, a rabbi. Throughout our hour together, he spent more

time looking at his phone than at me. He had posted something just before we sat down together, and was obsessively checking his numbers. He could not resist the allure of the *likes*.

If sophisticated, resourced adults struggle to navigate these platforms, how can we expect our kids to figure out how to self-regulate? How to hold a healthy self-image? How to honor real relationships and make good, moral choices? It's no wonder teens are struggling. It's hard to grow up in this environment—exposed to unlimited doses of judgment, callousness, cruelty, and so much heartache and sorrow. To try to figure out who we are in relationship to it all.

This is not to say that social media and technology are the sole cause of or even definitively causal in the spike in self-harm and suicidality. I don't want to be facile here about a very complex reality. It's also true that sometimes these platforms can contribute to mental wellness—including helping young at-risk people connect with one another and with health and wellness resources.

But we cannot ignore reality: over the last 10-15 years, there is a trackable, widespread spirit of anxiety, fear, sadness, hopelessness, anger, and urge to violence pervading our culture—all of which are exacerbated by ubiquitous social media use, and which are distancing us from precisely the people who would otherwise care for and support us when we're most vulnerable.

It's so unfair: some of the most toxic and pernicious forces in our society now live right in our pockets! Here to reinforce our worst feelings about ourselves and each other at any moment, day or night.

And, quite terribly, these very same platforms that compound our pain and sense of isolation now even offer us, and our kids, answers to the darkest questions about how we might relieve that pain.

It's so much harder now than when I was wearing frosted pink lipstick and using SunIn in the 80s, fighting with my mom about why she wouldn't let me wear Guess jeans like all the other girls. It's so much harder now, I think.

And even still, I can't help but think about how much we've learned about mental illness and emotional and spiritual health since then. When Carey was struggling, when I was in 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade, *nobody* spoke of the darkness. We didn't know how to talk about it, we didn't have a language for it. This left those who suffered from depression, anxiety, OCD, and suicidality—people like Carey—to essentially fend for themselves. Without even meaning to, we left Carey and her family to navigate the deepest darkness under a cloud of shame.

What would have happened, I wonder, if we had met her instead in the darkness? If we had told her we sometimes felt bad too? If we had stepped toward her precisely when our instinct was to run away?

Back in January, Representative Jamie Raskin told me, as we spoke about the death of his beloved son to suicide, that *we must remember that not everybody can be reached*. Some people—like Benjamin—have the most loving parents and the very best support, and even still, all the love in the world can't save them.

But many people *can* be saved. And so we must never stop trying to reach each other.

To do this, to reverse the trends that are so suddenly so deeply entrenched in our culture, we have to make sure the darkness so many of us are feeling is never met with blame or judgment or stigma. Because there is no *shame* in feeling desperate and dejected, isolated and lonely, unwelcome and unworthy. There is no shame in hurting inside. These feelings are not something to be *ashamed of*, but something to be *aware of*.

So let us talk about shame. We start, this shabbat, reading from the beginning of the Torah all over again. Shame emerges almost immediately:

וַיְהִי שְׁנֵיהֶם עֲרוּמִים וְאִשְׁתּוֹ וְלֹא יִתְבַּשְׁשׁוּ:

The two of them were naked, Adam and his wife, and yet they felt no shame. (Gen 2:25)

When they considered themselves, through their own innocent eyes, they were like children. They were fully exposed and felt no shame. And why would they? Until:

וַתִּפְקְחֵנָה עֵינֵי שְׁנֵיהֶם וַיֵּדְעוּ כִּי עֲרוּמִם הֵם וַיִּתְפָּרוּ עֲלֵהָ תְאֵנָה וַיַּעֲשׂוּ לָהֶם חֲגָרֹת:

Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they perceived that they were naked; and they sewed together fig leaves and made themselves loincloths. (Gen 3:7)

When they imagined how they looked through the gaze of another, they were ashamed. They felt that they needed to cover up. To put on a mask. To hide a part of themselves from one another, maybe from God. So they did. They hid. Just like so many of us—our shame makes us hide parts of ourselves that we're afraid for others to see.

But that, of course, is a recipe for disaster.

We know so much now, about shame. We know the three great dangers of shame:

1. Shame makes us feel *disconnected*, like we don't *belong* anywhere. This alienates us from community.
2. Shame renders us feeling unworthy of support or even of being alive.
3. Shame can lead us to feel hopeless and helpless, as if we are frozen in one story or reality and nothing will ever change.

Disconnected. Unworthy. Hopeless.

Shame is a profoundly destructive force. Father Greg Boyle of Homeboy Industries—the largest gang rehabilitation and re-entry program in the world—argues that shame stands at the heart

of nearly all addiction. In the winter, I was blessed to engage in a public conversation with Father Greg at the LA Public Library. *What can we do*, I asked him, *to help somebody move from shame toward healing, toward seeing themselves of worthy of love and connection and belonging?*

*At Homeboy*, he said, *people change when they are cherished. We try to create a community of cherished belonging. People walk through our doors and they are barricaded behind a wall of shame and disgrace, and the only way to scale that wall is tenderness. Tenderness is the connective tissue. Unless we treat one another with tenderness, we are not really connecting.*

Shame relies on secrecy and silence. It cannot survive being spoken out loud. It cannot survive tenderness. It cannot survive being met with love.

Listen to what happens when God confronts Adam and Eve and their shame driven fig leaf coverings:

וַיִּקְרָא ה' אֱלֹהִים אֶל-הָאָדָם וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אַיֶּכָּה:

God called out to the Human and said to him, "Where are you?"

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶת-קִלְכֵךְ שָׁמַעְתִּי בְּגַן וַאֲיָרָא כִּי-עֵירָם אָנֹכִי וָאֶחָבֵא:

He replied, "I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid."

וַיֹּאמֶר מִי הִגִּיד לְךָ כִּי עֵירָם אָתָּה הַמִּן-הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִיךָ לִבְלֹתִי אֶכְלֶמֶנּוּ אֶכְלָתָ:

"Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat of the tree from which I had forbidden you to eat?" (Gen 3:9-11)

Adam and Eve are afraid and full of shame because they are *exposed*. So they try to retreat, to cover up, as if that will magically resolve their predicament.

But God does not let them hide. God calls to them: *where are you? Who are you? Listen*, God is saying, *I love you as you are: accountable for your choices and behavior and mistakes, yes. And also: fundamentally Mine. Worthy of My love.*

God is modeling a sense of cherished acceptance, precisely the kind of tenderness Father Greg talks about. Homeys, Father Greg says, who have been in prison for so many years, will say: *we're used to being watched, we're not used to being seen.*

I think the same could be said about our kids: they're so used to being watched, but not used to being seen.

The forces arrayed against us, and against our kids, are real. But they are not unsurpassable. To build environments free of stigma means to work to fight shame through tenderhearted love. Shame cannot survive a confrontation with wide, all embracing, tenderhearted love.

Years ago, I heard a story of a patient who called Viktor Frankl in the middle of the night to report that she was planning to take her own life. Frankl spoke with the woman for two hours, listing for her every reason he could conjure up as to why she should live. He refused to hang up the phone until she promised that she was no longer in acute danger.

Shortly afterward, Frankl met with the patient and asked her what convinced her to live. She said it was not any of his arguments, but rather the fact that he had been willing to hear her, to engage her pain, for hours in the middle of the night that convinced her that she mattered enough to live.

That is cherished belonging.

So this is the big ask—and I know it’s a lot: at precisely the moment when you feel most vulnerable, most ashamed, most unworthy, most alone, you need to be really brave. Take a step toward someone who can help: a friend, a teacher, a rabbi, a therapist. Say the scary, silent part out loud. Say that you need help.

And for those who are on the receiving end of that scary call or meeting or encounter, you have to be brave too. You have to overcome the impulse to run away, to protect yourself by distancing from the person in need. Your presence, your tenderhearted love, your willingness to stay up late on the phone could save another person’s life.

And you must also know that you cannot hold this yourself. You, too, have to share with and get support from someone you trust. And in that way, we create a web of cherished belonging, tenderly carrying one another back toward life, always back toward life.

Because even when the darkness feels impenetrable, it often *can* be pierced—pierced by tenderhearted love. By presence. By the gentle, persistent reminder that there is so much to live for. That it really does get better. That the world is not nearly as cruel as it seems in middle school or 9<sup>th</sup> grade or in the deep recesses of the internet. That there are wonderful people right here in the real world waiting to know you, people you don’t even yet know, who will fill your life with joy. That the world is painful, yes, but also full of blessings. And that there is a purpose in this broken, bruised, and beautiful world *that only you can fulfill*.

We will do whatever we can to try to pierce the darkness with the tender reminder that we need *you*—exactly as you are.

Nanci and Peter, Emma and Casey—we will forever remember your dear Benjamin with love. May his memory reverberate as a blessing in this world for generations to come.

*Call or text 988 for free, confidential, 24/7 support,  
or call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (800) 273-8255.*