

Rabbi Jill Jacobs says that she avoids telling people she is a rabbi on an airplane at all costs, and I agree. Invariably the person beside you has more baggage to unpack than you actually brought on vacation. “‘Rabbi,’ my new acquaintance says, ‘I’m so sorry — I haven’t been to synagogue since my bar mitzvah.’ Or: ‘I guess I shouldn’t tell you that I had bacon for breakfast.’”¹ This experience isn’t limited to rabbis, and I suspect some of you have also chosen to obfuscate when stuck making polite conversation at 30,000 feet. Oh, you’re a physical therapist? I’ve been having this pain in my neck... Ah, you’re even tangentially connected to investing? My uncle is an accountant. **He** says I shouldn’t buy meme stocks, but what do **you** think?

Lori Gottlieb, psychotherapist and author, shares the same experience. “Telling somebody you’re a psychotherapist often leads to a surprised pause, followed by awkward questions like these: ‘Oh, a therapist! Should I tell you about my childhood?’ Or ‘Can you help me with this problem with my mother-in-law?’ Or ‘Are you going to psychoanalyze me?’ (The answers, by the way, are ‘Please, don’t’; ‘Possibly;’ and ‘Why would I do that here? If I were a gynecologist, would you ask if I was about to give you a{*n*} pelvic exam?’) But I understand where these responses come from,” Gottlieb writes. “It boils down to fear — of being exposed, of being found out...Will you see the **human** in my **being**?” people worry.

Will you see the **human** in my **being**? She’s right: all too often, we do worry about how others will perceive us and we act in ways that are designed to preclude others from seeing that we are, in fact — each of us — fallible human beings.

- When we are asked how we’re recovering from surgery, even if we are daunted by the long road ahead, we respond: “Good, how are you?”
- “I’m sorry I’m crying,” we say when sharing stories about our lost loved ones as the tears are rolling down our cheeks.
- “I’m okay” we say about each horrific thing after each difficult thing after each challenging thing thrown at us by the world in which we live.

When we act in ways that try to prevent others from seeing the **human** in our **beings**, when we try to soldier on and are deceptive about our feelings, we are actually doing ourselves harm.

Friends, it’s okay to NOT be okay.

It’s okay to not be okay. When everything in the world feels abnormal, to have an abnormal emotional response in turn IS normal.² And this world has been giving us plenty of abnormal. COVID and inflation-driven financial pressures and COVID and our world is simultaneously burning and flooding with climate change and COVID and a

¹ Jacobs, Jill. Where Justice Dwells: A Hands-On Guide to Doing Social Justice in Your Jewish Community. Page 6.

² Dr. Jamie Zuckerman In the November 10, 2020 Harvard Business Review article “It’s Okay to Not Be Okay” by Vasundhara Sawhney.

polarized, divisive political landscape and COVID and renewed antisemitism from both ends of the political spectrum and COVID and caring for the elder adults in our lives while caring for the adult children in our lives whose launches looked far different than we imagined and COVID...and when we avoid, suppress, and ignore our feelings of grief, loss, anger, hopelessness, loss-of-control — “I’m good,” we say — we don’t actually make those feelings go away: we just let those feelings grow stronger, making us in turn feel overwhelmed and like we cannot cope...we hide the **human** in our **beings** to our detriment.
It’s okay to not be okay.

You are in good company. When you talk to school guidance counselors and youth workers and parents, it quickly becomes clear that the kids are not alright. When you talk to therapists and counselors about their sometimes year long waiting lists, it becomes obvious the adults are not alright. As a people, as a nation, as a world we are not okay, and we need to sit with that; normalize that; talk about that rather than letting it fester and get worse.

Dr. Jamie Zuckerman says: “We don’t get to pick the emotions we want to have as human beings; it just doesn’t work that way. Allowing yourself not to feel ok involves accepting all feelings...and sitting with them until they pass.”³ It’s easier said than done for those of us well-versed in putting on a good face, and I’d like to offer some of the collected wisdom of Jewish tradition to make accepting you don’t **have** to be okay just a bit easier.

Have you ever thought about why our confessional prayers are offered in the plural: Asham**NU**, Bagad**NU**, Al Cheit Shecheta**NU**? Many possibilities exist, of course:

- If you are old enough to remember reading a newspaper, you are old enough to remember scanning the headlines and hoping that a Jewish person isn’t featured in them, realizing the actions of one reflect on us all: when one sins, we are all treated as sinners.
- If you remember the biblical story of Cain and Abel, you know that the answer to “am I my brother’s keeper” in Jewish tradition is a resounding yes: yes you are. *Kol Yisrael aravim zeh b’zeh*: All Israel is responsible for one another, we realize, and so *your* transgression is *my* transgression for helping to create the circumstances under which you transgressed.

But my ranking favorite explanation for why we confess in the plural comes from Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, who writes: “The purpose of public (communal, plural) confession is to facilitate the process whereby the community as a whole stands together in common recognition that all people fail at times...recognizing that fact, we may be quicker to forgive others.”⁴ We stand together owning our mistakes because to err is human and to forgive an act of the Divine for which we pray.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Gates of Understanding 2: Appreciating the Days of Awe, Page 121.

When we confess in the plural, we realize that all are human. You, me, your mortal enemy, and your best friend: all make mistakes, all transgress, all need to seek forgiveness. No one is perfect — even ourselves...or, in my case, especially myself — and when we understand that, *perhaps* we can come closer to judging ourselves in the same manner we judge others, or by the same standard we ask God to judge us this day. When you see a dear friend or a loved one struggling, you don't berate them; you have compassion, grace, understanding, forgiveness, right? We should only hold ourselves to the same standard. If it's okay for someone else to not be okay, let that be okay for you, too.

Second, I want to remind you of a text I cite frequently on Shabbat in preparation for our Mi Shebeirach L'Cholim prayer. When we say aloud the names of those in need of healing, we do so to not only focus our prayers but concert our attentions on their behalf. As the rabbis of the Talmud teach us, "There is no fixed measure for the number of times that one should visit the ill..anyone who visits an ill person takes from him one-sixtieth of his suffering."⁵ We can relieve suffering by making chicken soup or picking up a prescription or walking a friend's dog — tangible actions that need doing and allow us to feel helpful and accomplished — and we can relieve suffering even more when we lend a listening ear, are caring in our interactions, and don't allow our discomfort to make the situation worse.

When someone is upset or anxious or scared and expresses their emotion through tears, our first instinct is to make them stop crying. We feel uncomfortable because we feel helpless and we try to make them stop. "Here's a kleenex;" "it will all be okay;" "it could have been so much worse" we find ourselves saying because we don't like when people are not okay...and it only makes things worse. "Don't try to talk people out of their feelings. It's okay they they are experiencing pain."⁶ It's okay that for right now they are not okay. Sit with them. Say "I'm here with you because I care about you" or literally say "it's okay to not be okay right now" if you have to say anything at all. We relieve other's suffering when we hold space for their hard emotions and don't try to shut them down, when we normalize that everyone has **human** in their **being** and that it's okay to not be okay.

And in recognizing this tremendous capacity we have to help others, we must also realize the other's ability to help us. The Talmudic "one sixtieth" of suffering isn't quite as much as the folk wisdom of "a burden shared is a burden halved," but the sentiment is the same. Everything is easier when relying on supportive community. A partner or loved one. A friend. A rabbi. Someone who won't judge but will accompany, someone with whom we can expose the **human** in our **beings**. Eating or drinking or internalizing our feelings — "I'm good," we say — doesn't actually make these feelings any better... but turning to others for help can.

⁵ Babylonian Talmud Nedarim 39b.

⁶ <https://time.com/5566884/what-to-expect-from-therapy/>

Finally, any student of Jewish history knows that it is all too easy to take a morose view. Known colloquially as the rationale for most Jewish holidays — “they tried to kill us, we survived, let’s eat” — we know there are lots of low points on the timeline of Jewish existence. Expulsions, explosions, inquisitions, crusades, pogroms...most any day on the calendar could be used to commemorate a tragedy. The early sages of our tradition recognized this peril, though, and proposed Tisha B’Av, the 9th day of the month of Av, a singular day, as the chance to remember calamity lest we get stuck in a permanent down. We need to remember and never forget, they taught, but the valley of the shadow is open on both sides. We can move through it, out of it, not making sadness our singular dwelling place.

So, too, should it be with us. It’s okay to not be okay — but it’s not good to never be okay. “Anger and sadness, just like happiness and joy, come and go.”⁷ When our emotions get stuck, when they don’t change for more than a week, that’s when it’s time to seek help. Doctors, therapists, professionals can help us work through the experience of painful emotions that become stuck and preclude having other feelings. Not so that we can only focus on the good in life or be grateful because it could be worse, but so that we can reclaim and reaffirm that the human in our being is beautiful and real and universal. Sometimes we’re up; sometimes we’re down, and this is normal and natural and good. It’s okay to not be okay, really.

And if you are really not okay, if you are experiencing an urgent crisis, there are immediate resources you can turn to for help. The nationwide rollout of the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline is truly that: a lifesaver for people in times of need. Connecting you by phone or text to trained crisis intervention and mental health experts, more than 216,000 people called 988 — and 39,900 people texted — for support **just last month**.⁸ It’s okay to not be okay: and by recognizing, by sharing, by normalizing that understanding we can save lives.

We stand tonight at the culmination of the Yamim Nora’im, the Days of Awe or the Days of Fear — both are good translations — recognizing our many shortcomings. We feel vulnerable, we feel exposed, we feel found out. There is a **human** inside our **being**, as Dr. Gottlieb writes, and it’s okay for that human to be hurting in response to our failed efforts and the stresses imposed on us by the world in which we live. It’s okay to not be okay. Be kind to yourself, only judging yourself as you would those you love. Share your feelings of not being okay with others who care and accept their feelings of not being okay in return. Pay attention for times you feel stuck or in crisis and need more support. To pretend like everything is okay risks damage to ourselves beyond what will come when others realize that we, too, are human. There is **human** in our **beings**. We are human. You are human. It’s okay to not always be okay.

⁷ HBR.

⁸ <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2022/09/10/1121921647/new-988-mental-health-crisis-line-sees-jump-in-calls-and-texts-during-first-mont>