



**COLLEGE  
COMMONS**

## MENTAL HEALTH IN THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

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**Joshua Holo:** Welcome to the College Commons podcast, Passionate Perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers. Brought to you by the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion. America's first Jewish institution of higher learning. My name is Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Jack H. Skirball campus in Los Angeles and your host. You are listening to a special episode recorded at the URJ Biennial in December of 2019.

**JH:** It's my great pleasure to welcome you to this edition of The College Commons podcast and to learn together with me from outstanding professionals in the city of Atlanta who are at the forefront of dealing with mental health issues and substance abuse issues. Such as we know, pervades society and about which we learned here at the URJ, 2019 Biennial. We're going to hear from the leaders of the Berman Center and the Blue Dove Foundation, and I'm gonna ask them to introduce themselves around the horn, as we dig into some of the issues of treatment and education with which they are tasked. So I'd like to begin to my right.

**Justin Milrad:** Hi. It's wonderful to be here. My name is Justin Milrad and I am the CEO of the Berman Center, Intensive Outpatient program, based in Atlanta, built through Jewish Lens. I am also the co-founder of the Blue Dove Foundation, which was birthed here at the 2017 URJ Biennial.

**Daniel Epstein:** My name is Daniel Epstein. I am a psychotherapist and the Director of Client Care at the Berman Center and a co-founder of the Blue Dove Foundation.

**Alyza Berman-Milrad:** Hi. I'm Alyza Berman-Milrad. I am the founder of the Berman Center and the Executive and Clinical Director of the Berman Center and also an advisor to the Blue Dove Foundation.

**Gabrielle Leon Spatt:** Hi. I'm Gabrielle Leon Spatt. I'm the Executive Director of the Blue Dove Foundation, which focuses on education awareness and outreach for mental health and substance abuse through The Jewish Lens.

**JM:** I think a good part of the narrative is for Alyza to talk about why she started the Berman Center. And then maybe I can talk about why we started the Blue Dove Foundation.

**JH:** Great. Take it away.

**AB:** Okay. I've been in private practice for 15 years and as a Jewish therapist in Atlanta, which has a huge Jewish community. I had a lot of Jewish clients that I worked with. Over the years, I started having more and more substance abuse in my practice in addiction... And a lot of Jewish people who would come to me. And a lot of times when I would see them, it was very hush,

hush. They would oftentimes talk to me about how uncomfortable they feel, number one to be in a 12-step meeting, for example in a church where there's crosses. And they just didn't feel like they belonged or "No one got it", they would say a lot of times. If they had to go to treatment, a lot of the treatment centers and I would say the majority of treatment centers are Christian-base or they don't understand the culture of Judaism or the religion or the way of life and so they oftentimes would hide their religion sometimes or they would try to make other people understand. So they just... I heard a lot about it. The grievances over the years. And I also heard about the shame they felt within a Jewish culture in a community where there is a lot of high-achievers and they felt like that something was wrong with them, for having such a... They call it disease.

**AB:** So that was going on in my practice. And then about six years ago, I met a wonderful Orthodox Jewish girl, who I adored. She suffered from mental health, depression, anxiety through her whole life, which progressed into drug use. When I met her, she was in recovery from addiction and substance abuse. She was living in a treatment center and she would ask to go home for Shabbat every Friday night. She was always turned down. So I had to help her explain to the directors, the importance and significance of the Sabbath for our religion.

**JH:** And presumably for her own treatment?

**AB:** For her own treatment and spirituality. Right. They still denied her. We worked through it. I talked to her about just light the candles when you can, do it for yourself. She was okay with that until Pesach came up. She said... And her parents, extremely wonderful family, extended family, amazing, there was no issues in the home. So she said, "Can I please go home for Pesach, it's my favorite holiday. I love to cook with my mom, we sing songs, we have all these rituals that we do". She begged and begged and they kept saying, "No" to her. Her parents were devastated and so they took her out of the treatment center. We tried to come up with a great plan for her to live at home and work through a lot of the stuff that she was going through. She started struggling a little bit. One day she was craving drugs. She found heroin on the internet. At the time it was Black Tar heroin, which is now laced with fentanyl. She purchased it through Bitcoin 'cause she didn't have access to her money. So she used Bitcoin to buy it. One night she used it and immediately overdosed and died. It was her first time using it.

**AB:** Her parents, obviously called me right away and it was a very sad time. I started working with her mom. We became very close. Over the years, we kept talking and talking and talking until we were interviewed by the Jewish newspaper in Atlanta about how there's many, many deaths that continue to happen in Atlanta and no one's doing anything about it in the Jewish community. I started getting angry. I basically went home that night after this interview and I said, "Okay, I'm done. I'm doing something about it". So there comes the Berman Center and we opened it with, based on The Jewish Lens of Community Connection and Tikkun olam. And I actually... This girl I keep talking about was an artist. So I took a piece of her artwork and made it into my logo, which is a blue dove and I dedicated that opening to her. Her mom's very involved. It's really beautiful. So that's why we opened the Berman Center.

**JH:** Justin, tell us about the Blue Dove Foundation.

**JM:** So in 2017, we opened up the Berman Center and we weren't really sure if there'd be any demand. So as reformed Jews, we decided to go to the URJ Biennial and Daniel came with us and Alyza was here. The first day people would walk by our little booth and they would be curious, but not ready to talk. And then on the second day, they would get a little closer. Read some of the signage that we had. And on the third day, it was all-out group therapy.

[laughter]

**JM:** We had so many people come and tell us their stories and it was so obvious to us that mental health and substance abuse impacts the Jewish community. It doesn't discriminate based on age, gender, education, or socioeconomic status. And we kinda came home and Alyza, Daniel, and I were chatting, and in the conversations we had it was quite obvious that people were having a real tough time building connections, finding resources, and talking about it in their community. So we did some research, we found some other facilities built through a Jewish lens at a higher level of treatment, but we didn't really find any foundations that were looking out for the interest of the Jews. So that kind of birthed the Blue Dove Foundation, which is separate from the Berman Center, but somewhat inspired from the story. So our mission is quite simple, it's very wide and deep.

**JM:** Number one, education awareness and outreach, we wanna eradicate the shame and stigma in the Jewish community around mental health and substance abuse, and we do a lot of this through education and programming. The second thing we do is zero-interest loans and hardship scholarships for people who require treatment but may need some financial assistance. And that's something we're working on building. And then the third thing is we prototype projects that can be dropped in and scaled into other communities.

**JM:** For example, we have a platform called "QuietingTheSilence" where we bring people together to tell their stories in a very safe manner so that we can educate people. We do a mental health Shabbat program. We have a mental health Passover program. We also have been working on a mental health wellness toolkit where we want to empower people to hold trainings in their community to link Judaism and mental wellness, and then also get the basic literacy skills and understanding of what are the different conditions, how do I spot it, how do I react to it, and who do I escalate issues to. Because all too often, sadly, after the fact, when something bad happens, people say, "Well, I didn't really understand what to look for," or, "I knew there was an issue but I didn't know who to reach out to." So we are trying to create mental wellness first responders by giving them that information. And then in April of this year we hired Gabby Spatt as our Executive Director, who is doing an incredible job taking this foundation and our mission to the next level.

**JH:** Why the marriage, in terms of tackling the problems, between mental health and substance abuse?

**AB:** The reason why is because we have found that you can't treat one without the other. Oftentimes, it's kind of a cycle that mental health can contribute to the use of substances and vice versa, substances can contribute to a decline of mental health. And so we have found, Daniel and I and some other people, that if we treat one without the other, then we're missing a huge component of recovery.

**JH:** Are some people open to discussing mental health issues but not substance abuse or vice versa?

**DE:** For so long substance abuse treatment, or what people know as just kinda going to rehab, was just focusing on drug treatment and neglecting mental health such as depression, anxiety disorders, trauma, eating disorders, it goes on and on and on. And thank God, it's phasing out. People are really understanding the dual nature of mental health and substance abuse. People

typically use substances for relief.

**JH:** So, Gabby, can we plug your respective websites for resources?

**GS:** So Gabby Leon Spatt here and I joined the foundation, as Justin said earlier, in 2019. And it comes from personal loss and tragedy. Mental health, substance abuse is not anywhere in my professional background. My background is building and creating organizations, and things within inside a company. But I lost my younger sister who was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and also struggled with some substance abuse. In September 2017 she also purchased heroin, unbeknownst to her, which was laced with fentanyl, and overdosed and passed away.

**GS:** So that really is what brought me into this. And when I think about my Judaism in connection to our faith and culture and spirituality, it goes back to the idea of Tikkun olam, and how can we heal the world, how can we leave it a better place than we found it, the idea of Tikkun Ha-Nefesh, heal the soul. And so this work has really become that way to me. It's helped with my grieving and with my recovery and work from it. So that is how I ended up here. And every day we hear stories of tragedy, of trauma, of hope, and so it really helps us bring forward this work into the larger community outside of the city where we live, in Atlanta.

**GS:** And our website is full of resources. So that's [www.thebluedovefoundation.org](http://www.thebluedovefoundation.org). You can also email us anytime [info@thebluedovefoundation.org](mailto:info@thebluedovefoundation.org). When you visit the website you'll find tools and resources that you can use as an individual or also with your community and congregation. The news and resources that are on there, you'll see articles that people have written. And we have a mental health Shabbat toolkit if individuals are interested. We encourage individuals, organizations, in the month of May, to host mental health Shabbat dinners for Mental Health Awareness Month. And we have a mental health Shabbat supplement that we created with OneTable, who is really leading the Jewish community in using Shabbat as a vehicle for conversation.

**GS:** We also have a High Holiday mental health toolkit that's available for leadership and encouraging congregations. There is also soon to be the mental well-being toolkit that Justin was referring to earlier about training first responders in the community. We also have stuff for Hanukkah and for Tu B'Av and other Jewish holidays and articles that have been written by individuals that help relate to the topic.

[music]

**JH:** Before we return to the podcast, we wanna let you know about digital learning on the College Commons platform, beyond this podcast, which is available to the public at large. Check out the online courses at [collegecommons.huc.edu](http://collegecommons.huc.edu). For in-depth learning digital syllabi assignments, inspiration for teaching and one of our most influential courses called Making prayer real. Subscribe with your synagogue for all this and more, just click sign up at [collegecommons.huc.edu](http://collegecommons.huc.edu). Oh, and one more thing, help us out and rate us on iTunes. But whatever you do, do not give us five stars, unless we deserve it. Now back to our podcast.

**JH:** I think human beings promote shame, not because they want to harm people, but because they instinctively resort to shame as a way of putting a fence around a problem or warding off problems or hopefully containing them or whatever, as misguided as it may be I suspect that's the motivation, most of the time. And so I wanna ask, not because I think the answer is yes, but because I think it's worth asking. Is there ever a way, a mechanism, a time, a degree, a manner in which shame can be productive?

**DE:** I hear what you're saying as in... We are hard-wired to wanna avoid anything to kinda come into our home, or our bodies that could be dangerous or toxic, right so we wanna keep any kind of a virus out or a sickness out or someone who could cause harm. So I think we have for just probably millennia seen something that is different from us, and identified that as a threat that we want to keep out of the gates. That factor is already inside the house and we are all dealing with it, whether it's my own experience, yours, I can't honestly say that there's anyone here at Biennial who does not, either live with some type of mental health experience or love somebody, your son or mother whomever, right? We're also impacted by it. I think it's hard to try to keep things out because it's already... It's been in forever.

**JH:** So I get your answer to the question, which is, maybe shame has a protective function, maybe it doesn't, but it certainly might, but if it does have a protective function, it's too late because the protection has already failed and it's already part of our system, our world, our...

**DE:** Yeah. Anxiety and fear are very closely related. We are so hard-wired for survival, to experience anxiety. We need to look at something that may be a threat and say that could be dangerous, we have to kinda stay in a self-preservation mode, so it's not like some people have anxiety and some don't, just about every single person on the earth experiences it, even if it's the anxiety of, "I need to set my alarm tonight, so I can wake up on time tomorrow." Just that little healthy level of anxiety or if I'm changing lanes in traffic, I have a little bit of anxiety it's very healthy to say I should use my turn signal and check my mirrors, right and then anxiety becomes more considered disordered when, right? When it's that diminishing return of anxiety where it's no longer being productive or helpful, that's actually starting to debilitate me.

**JH:** Right. I'm thinking the same thing about shame. So I have two kids. And if one of my kids gets exposed to drugs and refuses them because they don't wanna ashame me or because they feel that I would be ashamed of them or whatever, I'm not sure that bothers me, it would bother me if after the fact, this same shame, then becomes an inhibitor from my kid coming to me and I recognize the liabilities, the liabilities I think we get.

**AB:** So I think we have to... This is Alyza. I think that we need to define what shame is, became the way clinically, the way in my opinion, I do not think shame is productive at all. And that's a hard no for me and I'll explain why, but the way I define shame is that you have done something, some action and that you have this feeling of shame/guilt for and so from what I've seen in my life, in my personal life and with my clients and everyone I work with shame doesn't help anyone move forward. It keeps them in the negative, so when they start feeling so ashamed of what they do, I see even their mental health decline. Clients who have said to me, I'm just so ashamed of the drugs I did or when I did do drugs I ended up doing this to get more money to buy drugs. And if we focus on everything they have done in their lives, how do they move forward?

**JH:** So you're defining shame, by definition as after the fact, after the fact of the thing that precipitated the shame?

**AB:** Right, to me shame is so internal.

**JH:** Good, so we have a different... We're working in a different lexicon, that's helpful.

**AB:** Yeah, right.

**DE:** It's very popular, I'm sure the listeners have heard of Brene Brown's research on shame and she defines it as this belief that we are unworthy of connection. So if that is the definition we're working with, then I'll sit here with you with the hard no.

**JH:** It's a wholly negative thing.

**DE:** Right. Yeah, and now it's really kind of... What you're saying is kind of like reputation or a public appearance and maintaining a certain type of face to say, I can do that, but I'm looking at the, I'm looking down the line of the potential consequences.

**JH:** Right. It's like the colloquialism when they say he's shameless, meaning he has no inhabiting morality that prevents him from doing bad stuff. He has no shame, but shame being a good moral preventative thing against... So I think that's very helpful. We should use different terms because they're actually very different phenomena and your... I'm looking at Justin now the Blue Dove Foundation is working together with the Berman Center to remove the shame as you described it, as Alyza described it, which is this... Or as Dan described it as this unworthiness, this sense of being unworthy which only undermines your capacity to grow.

**JM:** So speaking on behalf of the Blue Dove Foundation we're working with a lot of different organizations nationally to eradicate shame and stigma. And I think the best advice I can give to your listeners, is get educated. People don't always understand what they're going through. Their friends and family don't understand, and a lot of that creates stigma and if you have a better understanding and definition of what someone's going through instead of being on the sidelines, you can actually help solve problems. You can be there for you, because a lot of people are feeling very lonely. And in 2019, Thomas Friedman said it really well. He said, "The speed of change is happening at a greater pace than we can process it." So we are in the mental health era where a lot of people are having a tough time with the day-to-day basics.

**JM:** So, what we've seen work beautifully and it's starting to work in Atlanta, and I think we're far ahead of many other communities, is the community aspect. Being there for one another, breaking down the walls of shame and stigma. And while you don't have to be a therapist to be helpful, everyone plays a role and just providing a little bit of empathy and emotional intelligence, and intention to how you communicate with people, and how you treat yourself, can make a world of difference.

**JH:** It can require courage on the part of the family members of the person suffering either substance abuse or mental health issues, because sometimes the family member is afraid of sparking conflict or distancing the person from them.

**DE:** Connection is critical for recovery. And then the I have many people I've seen in my career, those who are successful and succeeding and are feeling well are connected, period.

**JM:** At at the Berman Center, our clients who graduate our program that do the best when they graduate are the ones who stay connected to their... We call it the tribe, and they have their community and they have their people and it's really a beautiful thing because they're there for one another. Whether someone needs help moving or someone needs to go through a mock interview or need some advice on something in life, or is looking for a job, seeing the positive results that come out of that is pretty incredible. It just reinforces community. And when you have an environment that is willing to talk about it and is supportive, it's incredible. And last year... In 2018 and 2019, the Blue Dove Foundation created a High Holy Day toolkit where we gave information to the different synagogues encouraging the rabbi or the temple president or

some lay leader to talk about mental health and substance abuse from the pulpit. And the feedback we got is, it really opened up the door for conversations.

**JH:** Implied in some of the things you're saying are the urgency that people who do have connections, re-establish them and pursue them, but that they fundamentally have them in the first place, or at least they came from them. But surely there's a large sect of the population that is painfully isolated more or less at the get-go, that strikes me as a whole other challenge. And it only strikes me now as I'm listening to you. Do you encounter that? Do you have have wisdom on that?

**DE:** I think that's a good time to reach out to that person. We did the "QuietingTheSilence" event that we did on Monday night at one of the synagogues in Atlanta. We did a few lines of Hanukkah and the metaphor and looking at the Chumash on the Hanukiah as being the candle that lights the other ones, the one that is connecting. So if someone is isolated and they're not gonna take it on themselves to then go and connect maybe that's when you can reach out and be the Chumash for that person.

**JH:** A timely piece of advice.

**DE:** You like that?

**JH:** I like that one a lot. It's good.

[laughter]

**JM:** I think another interesting thing is the Jewish community is warm and welcoming and they have a lot of programming and it doesn't have to be necessarily in the Jewish community. But it takes a lot of strength, but if you're really lonely and you want connection, most communities have things that are going on. You can go to a synagogue, you can go to a JCC, you can join a youth group, you can ask someone to a movie. Listen, recovery takes work and you have to be willing to put in the work, but the work isn't always hard. And every touch point matters, and I always say to people, something small like smiling at someone, saying hello, asking someone how their day is can be the difference between a positive and a negative outcome.

**JM:** And I once heard a story about someone who was going home with a plan to kill themselves. And just a random person said hello, smiled, asked them how their day was. And that person said to themselves, "You know what, today is not the day. I've changed my mind, I'm gonna go get help and I wanna thrive." So, the smallest... We all have a responsibility to make sure that not only do we take care of ourselves but we take care of others, whether we know them or not, but small gestures, make a difference. Can I ask a question for Gabby? Can you talk a little bit about partnerships and outreach and things that we have done?

**GS:** So the Blue Dove Foundation, I think a lot of our success is based on partnerships. Partnerships within our own community, in Atlanta and the partnerships that we've been able to establish with organizations across the country, small and large, have also helped us grow so quickly. And we really couldn't do it without these like-minded organizations. For instance, "No shame On U" which is based here in Chicago. We worked with them and another organization in Chicago, Michigan to do a program around Tu B'Av. So the Jewish holiday of Tu B'Av is kind of today, the modern Jewish Valentine's Day in Israel and we said, "How can we challenge the community to choose love, choose self-care and choose gratitude?" And to remind the individual to care about yourself, just as much as you care about other people too.

**GS:** And we used that holiday as a vehicle to learn and to share and we had people writing cards and sending letters to people across the country, both hand-written and also electronic. And on the website we defined how do you look at this Jewish holiday through a mental health lens? And we got incredible feedback about that. So we look at it that way we look at it through the lens of Hanukkah as Daniel was saying. We have a great tool we created pushing people to think about the eight nights of Hanukkah and the miracle of light and to move past the darkness and each night, think about the miracles that you have in your light and actually write it down and commit it to paper because when you're writing it also connects with your brain and it puts it that much more, there permanently. So we really look at Judaism, as a way to think about mental health in a new way and using our faith and our spirituality, in our culture to come together.

**JH:** So I wanna thank you all for your important work at the Berman Center and the Blue Dove Foundation and for taking the time to share your ideas and your help here on the podcast. I know it will resonate with a lot of people.

**DE:** Thank you.

**GS:** Thank you.

[music]

**JH:** You've been listening to the College Commons podcast produced and edited by Jennifer Howd. And brought to you by the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. For this URJ biennial series special thanks to Mark Palev and URJ chief program officer, and biennial Director and Liz Grumberger Director of North American Events. We hope you've enjoyed this episode and please join us again at [collegecommons.huc.edu](http://collegecommons.huc.edu).

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