

SBM 2017 SHAYLA

Kaila Adamah Jellison was a junior at Samuel Myerson High School when she suffered her first attack of manic-depressive illness.

It began with exhilaration. I had always been a highly competent and painstaking student, but prone to two-dimensional readings of texts and human beings. Suddenly I could see into the depths of literature and people, made giant intuitive leaps, and everything made so much sense! I still experience the world more richly as a result of that first week. But the crash came soon after. My limbs became concrete; my mind, an uncomprehending blank. Nothing made sense; nothing interested me. Then came an obsession with death – I wandered through the local cemetery for several nights in a row writing endless morbid poems and reciting kaddish at each gravestone that seemed to have a Jewish name . . . But no one in school seemed to notice anything amiss; I still don't understand how.

A second attack came in graduate school, soon after her marriage to Marcus. This time the manic phase led to uncontrolled spending and impulsive rule-breaking; the depressive phase almost killed her.

I bought fountain pens – tens of fountain pens, because my ideas deserved to be expressed in perfect calligraphic form. I shoplifted some of them because the line at the store was too long. Then I started collecting wild turkey feathers and sharpening them into quills so that I could write the perfect Megillat Esther – and I did! . . . a few days later I was hallucinating, and thinking suicidally in very specific ways ...

A psychiatrist put her on lithium, which worked. But for several years she would stop taking the pills whenever she felt good enough for a while – the highs were too seductive, and the lows no longer seemed real. She thought she could take them in time if her moods seemed to be spiraling out of control; but she was constantly in danger of falling completely over one cliff or the other. But one day in Elul, Marcus came home to find her in the grip of a paranoid/grandiose fantasy.

The world was out to get me; or maybe the world was broken, and only I could fix it, by repenting properly on Yom Kippur. But my whole community was conspiring to stop me . . .

Kaila was hospitalized on 28 Ellul, in a facility well out of walking distance of any motel or Orthodox community and with no space for guests and limited visiting hours. She is prescribed medication that makes her ravenously hungry. Her doctors say that while it is almost certain that she will return to normal moods soon, having caring visitors daily will probably lead to a significantly faster return to normalcy. They also warn that this is remission, not recovery, and that this cycle will happen again unless she succeeds in staying on her meds.

As you are a close friend of the family, and an informal halakhic authority of some repute, it is not surprising that when you visited that night, both Kaila and Marcus had questions they want to ask you:

Kaila:

- 1) Is the megillah kosher?
- 2) If I blow shofar for myself, can I make the berakhah?
- 3) Should/may/must I fast on Yom Kippur?

Marcus

- 1) Can I take a cab to visit her on Shabbat and yom tov?
- 2) Our minhag has always been for her to make the hamotzi on Friday nights. Can I be yotzei with her berakhah while she is hospitalized? (Was I yotzei with her berkakhot during these interim periods?)

Sometime before Pesach, with Kaila having been out of the hospital after Sukkot and medication-compliant since, she decides to write a magazine article about her experiences for the OUs Jewish Action, with the goal of destigmatizing mental illness in the Orthodox community. Jewish Action accepts the article and asks you if you're willing to write up the answers you gave her, with your reasoning, so they can either publish or link to it. They also

pass on that several rabbis on their advisory board expressed deep interest in reading as fully developed a teshuvah on the questions as you can produce.