

Zak Williams Talks About the Power of Comedy, Community, and Connection



BY SUSAN SCHWAMM

Mental health challenges and issues have, in the past, been spoken about behind closed doors. Now, a community initiative, Nafshenu Alenu, in partnership with the Five Towns Gural JCC, is helping to bring these subjects to the forefront of our conversations, highlighting ways that we can help each other with regards to mental health struggles. It's an organization that is passionate about helping to band our community together to support mental health awareness.

Stuart Katz and Rabbi Dr. Yehuda Septimus are the forces behind Nafshenu Alenu. Over the course of the next few months, Nafshenu Alenu will be presenting weekly programs focusing on different mental health topics. Each week, a guest speaker will speak in a different shul or community center in the Five Towns and address a different mental health subject, including anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and eating disorders.

The first forum took place in Young Israel of Lawrence-Cedarhurst earlier this month and featured Zak Williams, mental health advocate and son of comedian Robin Williams. Zak took a few moments of his time to speak with TJH about his passion for mental health, his mental health journey, and why community support is so vital for people's wellbeing.

Zak, you recently kicked off the Nafshenu Alenu initiative in the Five Towns community with the first event held at Young Israel of Lawrence-Cedarhurst. What was the gist of your message for the community in your speech?

The focus was on a topic I call mental hygiene, which can be different for different folks, but it generally revolves around nutrition, fitness, mindfulness, meditation, potentially prayer, community support, therapy – things like that. In kicking off the Community Focus series for Nafshenu Alenu, we wanted to focus on the discussion around community support because that's a universal need for people in terms of helping. Connection and community is essential. And that is effectively the core theme of the series and for Nafshenu Alenu.

In the past, and probably present as well, mental health issues have been placed under the rug, behind the closet, behind 20 locks on a door. There's generally been a big stigma to mental health issues – and not just in our community, I would say even in the whole world. How do we bring out community support for these issues that in the past have been something that's been dealt with so hush-hush?

Well, I think the challenge is that often mental health and discussing mental health issues is conflated with dealing with serious mental illness, but the fact is we all deal



With the audience at the Nafshenu Alenu event



Zak with Stuart Katz and Rabbi Yehuda Septimus at the recent event

with mental health on a spectrum. And the more that we can acknowledge that, the more we can break the stigma down relating to things like serious mental illness, but also, we can look at where we all fit as individuals on that spectrum at different points in our life.

I think that's really where we need to be thinking about how our communities can evolve to accept the fact that there is a spectrum, that each one of us is on our own mental health journey, and ideally, we can find meaningful connection and happiness along that spectrum. In the United States, the challenge is that the terms "mental health" and "crisis" are synonymous with one another. And as a result of that, when we talk about mental health, we think about crisis care.

But the good news is, when we talk about mental health, if we introduce the topics of prevention, of everyday activity like mental hygiene, we can actually layer it meaningfully into the daily conversation in a way where it doesn't involve someone ending up having to be institutionalized. Someone had an overdose. Someone ended up hurting themselves or others. That's crisis, and really what we need to orient is way before any of that happens, how can we identify things we can do to take care of ourselves? How can we identify issues that are starting to snowball? How can we discover and learn about ourselves, our families, our community, our friends, and say, "Hey, you're not taking care of yourself. Let's find out ways in which you can?"

That's what I love about this community initiative, because it upholds all the values of Jewish culture, Jewish community, but also brings forth an accessibility in the conversation. For me, I find that a program like this is essential. It needs to exist not only in spiritual institutions but in institutions everywhere. We need to be able to think about prevention. We need to be able to think about taking care of ourselves so that we can show up for others. It's the very meaning of service.

How do you take care of yourself and focus on your mental hygiene?

Community is front and center there. Meaningful connection with others, service, nutrition, and mindfulness – mindfulness really grounded in gratitude. My personal spiritual practice is related very much to recovery. I'm part

of the recovery community. And, fun fact, I'm of Jewish heritage.

Really? I didn't know.

We only found out a few years ago. My maternal grandmother was adopted into an Italian-American family. She was Jewish.

Wow. Zak, welcome to the fold.

Thanks. We only found out a few years ago, but it was interesting. But I think it's important. The reason why I bring up spiritual practice and the like is because I think it's an essential element for so many people's mental hygiene rituals. And where I think things can kind of go awry

“We need to be able to think about taking care of ourselves so that we can show up for others.”

is if we just rely upon doing something once a week, once a month. In this day and age, in this modern era, just therapy is not going to cut it, right? We can't just do one thing occasionally. We really need to think about how we can integrate daily habits into our lives to live richer, more meaningful, more connected lives. But the universal of it, and something that I find deeply important, is connection is everything. And a constant across the board is community.

What do you mean by connection to the community?

People being connected with one another. You can't thrive in isolation. This is so essential to the work of

Stuart Katz and Rabbi Yehuda Septimus and Nafshenu Alenu because they emphasize community. They emphasize in-person connection. And that's an absolutely essential element of it.

You spoke about mindfulness and gratitude. Are there any rituals that you do daily or weekly to focus on gratitude?

Yes. I wake up in the morning and I list several things – doesn't need to be more than a few – that I'm grateful for, that I can ground my day in. Personally, I'm very appreciative of my family, my children and my wife, my siblings, and my parents. And then extending beyond that, the opportunity to be of service, to be grounded in the capability of taking care of myself, to show up for others. That's something I'm deeply grateful for. I'm grateful of the work that I'm able to do, and I'm very grateful of my health because it's something that if I take for granted, one day it could be taken from me. Every day it's a blessing that I have my health.

You mentioned that you're so grateful for your family. Do you feel that being a dad has given you a different outlook on certain things?

Absolutely. Well, it gives me an outlook specifically around mental health. One of the reasons why I do the work I do is that I can hopefully contribute to change that will enable my children to grow up in a stigma-free world. That's one of the chief drivers of motivation for me.

Over the past few years, mental health issues are becoming topics that are being discussed openly. Have you seen that in the work that you do?

I have. But we're also now unifying it under the topic of mental health. Now that we're able to really start identifying and be open and vulnerable about our feelings and positions on these types of topics, I think that is a positive evolution in the right direction.

Can you tell us a bit about your journey into mental hygiene and mental health?

After my father died by suicide, I was having a really tough time of things. I was doing unhealthy things like self-medicating using alcohol to manage my anxiety, depression, and the complex PTSD I was diagnosed with. And I realized something had to change, and I had to focus on specifically the advocacy to start the healing process. But in order to do that, I first needed to show up for myself and say, "Hey, I'm worth it." That's what ultimately kicked off my journey.

Is there something that we can do to reach out to the younger generation to teach them about mental hygiene?

There's a part of me that wants younger children to start slowly in their discovery journey. You don't want to immerse people into everything relating to mental health and crisis and so forth off the bat. I think the time to really focus on education is high school specifically. And then younger than that, of course, we want to layer in education, but we want to start slow.

Nowadays, we hear of many more children and teens having anxiety issues. Do you feel that children or teens nowadays have more anxiety than years ago or is it just being labeled in a different way that it used to be?

That's a really good question. I say there's different

types of anxieties. In the developed world, we are exposed to so much. We're over-marketed to. There's so much news. There are so many stressors. There's technology; there's social media. So it's a different type of stress and anxiety that's cropping up. Also, the food that we're eating can be less nutritious if we're eating fast food or processed foods. There's more sugar. There are just all these different things that are contributing to more stress on our systems. The main thing is being aware of what it is

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that's stressing us out and understanding historically that what we're dealing with now is a different animal. And when I say "we" I mean not only the Jewish community but cultures all throughout the world. And so, the lens that I have is different. And we need to acknowledge it in new and innovative ways so that we can deal with the stress and the traumas and the anxieties of everyday life in a way that best supports them.

When we talk about Jewish communities and those


who went through the Holocaust, there is also the nature of generational trauma. It also manifests in the activation and de-expression of genes through epigenetics. It's important to acknowledge that there's the trauma of the Holocaust not only in survivors but also in their descendants.

You said that your father, Robin Williams, in a way, started you off on this journey towards mental health when he took his own life. But what wonderful lessons do you have from your dad that you take with you on this journey and keep with you today?

It's very simple. What he instilled in me is to try to be kind, always.

It's who he was. It was just part of his being. He was a kind person, and he shared with me that the importance of kindness takes precedence over everything else.

Did you feel that his humor was a way to deal with things, or was that just the natural disposition that he had?

His way of performing through stand-up, through acting, and so forth was his way of managing. It was soothing for him. He loved to perform because it helped calm him and helped invigorate him. He was pretty introverted. But at his foundation, performing really related to him feeling like he was being of service. He loved helping people laugh. 



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