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As this column gets set to publish, I am preoccupied with the horrific attack at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh this past week. In addition to processing the losses that have stricken so close to home, I am working to make sense of the terrorism, violence, and anti-Semitism we Jews are facing in this country in a way that we have never before, and will certainly deal with these issues in a future column. In the meantime, I wrote this unrelated piece below – on a different pressing topic – prior to the events of October 27.

PARENTING MY TEEN IN THE MIDST OF OHIO’S DRUG-ADDICTION CRISIS

By Alanna E. Cooper | October 31, 2018

I’ve been working with my colleague Sheryl Hirsh since shortly after her daughter Melissa died of an accidental drug overdose in 2013. Through many conversations, Sheryl has given me a rich picture of Melissa, and the events leading to her death. But this past week, Sheryl shared one new surprising detail with me.

She told me about one of the legal agents assigned to Melissa’s case, who was unable to wrap his mind around the challenges of parenting a child who is suffering from addiction. Because Melissa lived with her mother – this particular judge reasoned – it was impossible that Sheryl did not know about her daughter’s addiction.

As a parent of a teen, this detail struck me particularly hard. New technologies have given me the ability to monitor so many aspects of my own daughter’s life: her screen-time, her snap-chats, her physical whereabouts, and her grades on every single school assignment. Still, I cannot – and should not – know everything going on in my daughter’s life.



Sheryl Hirsh & Alanna E. Cooper

First, because I must give my teenager freedom to explore the world and navigate it on her own. Second – and perhaps most relevant to the judge’s comments – we parents simply cannot hear and see everything our children are doing and with whom.

It seems trite to say that “it takes a village.” But this pithy statement is relevant now more than ever. Despite social media and all sorts of new surveillance technology, we parents need our children’s teachers, counselors, spiritual leaders, youth mentors, and even their friends to help us with the task of raising them.

We need these various people in our communities to interact with our teens, to look them in the eye, to have a sense of how they appear when they are happy and healthy, and how they look when they are distant and preoccupied. We need you to speak with each other, and to speak with us when you see signs of trouble.

I thought deeply about the importance of this support while attending a workshop last week, which was called, “It Happens Here: Addiction and Mental Health Issues in the Jewish Community.” Sheryl organized the event at CWRU-Siegal as part of the important work she has done over the past few years to address the opioid epidemic here in northeast Ohio.

Thirty Jewish community leaders attended the event. They came from across a broad religious spectrum, and from various local Jewish community organizations. Under the guidance of visiting workshop facilitators (Jory Hanselman of [BaMidbar Wilderness Therapy](#) and Marla Kaufman of [Jewish Addiction Awareness Network](#)) the group discussed how to reduce the stigma against mental illness and drug addiction in Jewish institutions, and how to create religious, spiritual and communal spaces for addressing the issue.

Sheryl told the group that when she lost her daughter, she did not think of seeking support in her synagogue. “If however, it was discussed more openly in the prayers, or in sermons,” Sheryl explained, “it may have seemed more familiar and less like something I should be ashamed of.”

Slowly, this is changing, and I am personally grateful for that. I need to know that when my daughter is out there in the world and not under my watch, there are other caring eyes looking out for her too. And that if my husband and I fall short, a friend, teacher or community leader might just help to catch her.

To learn more, attend the FREE lecture “[Addiction and Suicide: Correlations and How a Community Responds](#),” on Thursday, December 6 at 7pm.

Want to read more of my columns? Previous Jewish Explorations editions can be found [here](#)