

Rosh Hashanah Drash 5770

*Shabbat Shalom and L'shanah Tovah tikatevu.* A peaceful Sabbath and a good and sweet year to all of you and may we all receive G-d's blessing. My husband Will and I have two young boys, Shai and Boaz, ages 6 and 4. They both love being Jewish, which, I suppose, is not odd as they have never known anything else. They embrace it with innocence and wonder and a world of possibility as they make connections to it in ways that only children can. Both of them love Shabbat and they love going to synagogue too. For them it is a collection of memories: songs, stories and dancing from our Friday Night Live service, the fun and games of festive holidays, the wonder of learning in Beit Sefer, and the place where they saw their Daddy and Papi married last summer. As much as they love synagogue at our haimish little home on Dolores Street, they especially love coming here to the Herbst Theater for High Holidays. They get giddy with excitement and they say "Are we going to Big Synagogue Daddy?" To them, this is a really Big Synagogue and today is a special day marked by that sense of grandeur and significance. And as I stand up here before all of you today, *schvitzing*, and I look out at your faces, *kinahorra*, this really is a Big Synagogue. When I ask my boys what is so special about Big Synagogue and Rosh Hashanah, they tell me: running through the long hallways that echo, eating apples and honey, saying Shana tovah and loving everyone, and then they say "Today is the birthday of the World." And I think to myself, 6 and 4? *Takah* –we are raising them well.

Today is the birthday of the world - the day that we celebrate the legend of creation. Rosh Hashanah does not actually mark the creation of the world, but according to our legends, our midrashim, G-d started the creation of the world several days before. Today marks the day that G-d created humankind. The day that G-d breathed life into the first

human souls and the world that G-d had created would first be revealed. We sound loud blasts of the *shofar* to mark this day and remind us of the life giving breath, which brought us into being.

Creation. Kind of odd isn't it? In Siddur Sha'ar Zahav, our new prayer book, there is a *Queer Amidah* which states "God of Oneness, Infinite Eternal, how queer of You to have created anything at all." It's true. Why create anything at all if you are the Source of all Being? And why do we, G-d's creation, create anything at all? In Pirke Avot, the Ethical Teachings of our Elders, it speaks of how at twilight, at the end of the sixth day of creation, before G-d rested and the first Shabbat began -- in those final moments, G-d created the primordial tools that would make all future tools. Perhaps it is humankind itself to which our elders are referring, as G-d's instruments of creation; that we are the humans who will make all future humans. What a responsibility.

To make and fashion something...sometimes less than perfect...and to have the power and the will to return to it, and to re-create it at will. To see it, to hold it, to kvell in it, and draw pleasure from it -- and to know that it is good -- this is part of our human condition. We also live in a world where illness and adversity and things beyond our control are part of our human condition as well.

My bubbe Dora, of blessed memory, my mother Pauline, *alav hashalom*, and her sister, my Aunt Rose, of blessed memory -- they all lived into their late 80's and early 90s. These 3 matriarchs of my family were strong women in whose shadows I was raised and through whose example I was taught how to face challenges, pain, and illness in life. Faced with the day to day realities of diabetes, cancer and heart disease, they still managed to lead normal and productive lives filled with *naches* and joy that far outweighed their pain

and suffering. They managed to transcend their suffering, to rise above it – and they were even transformed by it. Tractate Megillah, in the Talmud, tells us that, "G-d creates the healing before the illness." My mother taught me that the healing was always there, before the illness, to be realized through the love of family and community.

I believe that in sharing our stories and our common experiences, we gain strength and become powerful agents of change, and so now I want share a part of my story that is difficult to tell, and even feels risky – but here goes:

In the middle of last summer, 2008, I came down with a very severe case of shingles. Beyond the blistering and the physical pain of the shingles, I was unaware that it could also affect my mental health. Within a few short weeks, I was unable to work... unable to face simple daily activities. My ability to function as a husband, a father, a friend, a worker, and as a productive member of our community were all severely impaired. Before I knew or began to understand what was going on with me, I was faced with a litany of judgment and misunderstanding from others, and even my own self-doubt. I went into hiding about what I was experiencing, which only helped to further isolate me and to create more distance between my condition and any sort of recovery. Through the caring support of my husband, my family, our Cantor, our Rabbi, and our community, I began to get the necessary medical and mental health treatment that I needed for what had manifested as bipolar disorder. Just this realization, naming what was going on with me, helped me to get the necessary treatment to begin to make my way back to good health. I learned that one suffers a lot more by hiding from something than from facing up to it.

In January of this year, after 7 years of service to an employer, I lost my job due to a widespread layoff at my company. And while I cannot say for sure, I can only think that my

name made it on the list of the first round of layoffs due to the stigma attached to the mental health issues I was facing. But, I am no stranger to stigma and adversity. I came out of a dark closet to face the prejudice surrounding homosexuality 21 years ago - at a time when it was not even remotely safe to do so. Today, I come before this congregation to come out again – to emerge from another closet – one of stigma, judgment and ignorance surrounding mental health issues. This may well be the “last closet” left for many of us. As a community we must rise above and confront the scorn and misconceptions, and acknowledge that like so many other life-threatening and chronic conditions, we are all faced with the reality of mental illness. It is a healthcare concern that deserves to be treated with no less parity than we would the diabetic, the AIDS or cancer patient, or those with a physical disability.

In Midrash Bereshit Raba, another creation story, it says “On first thought, G-d wanted to create the world through Divine judgment (*din*), but such a world could not endure, so G-d added on compassion (*rachamim*) and loving-kindness.” It is through the compassion of others that I began to re-integrate my life and I began to recover. The midrash continues, “Great are the righteous for they transform judgment into mercy.” Any illness can easily feel like a judgment to the sufferer. And healing feels like the most compassionate and merciful form of loving-kindness. The great 12<sup>th</sup> century physician, sage, and teacher, Moses Maimonides, Facebook screen name: “The Rambam”, taught that the entire community is responsible for the health of its individual members, and, if there is a malady afflicting the mind or the spirit, it must be dealt with first, in order for a complete recovery.

If we truly are a community, we need to embrace everyone; and as Jews we have a responsibility to take care of all the ill among us, no matter what the diagnosis --because the healing really was created before the illness. We are the humans through which all future humans are fashioned - the conduits through which healing begins.

On this day, the birthday of the world, we can celebrate by beginning to re-create a world of hope and healing for our children and our fellows. I believe that we all have a personal and moral obligation to treat each other with compassion and respect, and to refrain from judgment around these very real issues. Healthcare Reform, and the accompanying Mental Health Parity Act, are a legacy that at this instant in time are very relevant and deeply connected with our tradition. They matter to me personally and I hope that they do to you as well.

In April of this year, I emerged from my dark closet and I was blessed to find a new job with a great employer. On the first day of my employment, I entered a new building with a slogan written on the wall from the company's 1996 advertising campaign that spoke to me in a different way than any of the irrational and condemning voices in my head from months before. It read, "Here's to the crazy ones..." ...and while I think the word "crazy" is indicative of the kind of stigma of which I speak... this time it spoke to me personally and without derision. This ad went on to say, "...the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the ones who do." I believe that as Jews... as human beings... as G-d's instruments, we share a moral imperative, to think... no -- to try to change the world.

But such a path always begins with a personal story of a personal journey. Community organizing begins with telling our individual stories and drawing power from

our common experience – the power of creation. There are materials out in the lobby today that can help you understand what you can do to make sure that the institutions and the people who wield power hear our stories, and together we can bring about change. This truly is a Big Synagogue – one of many powerful voices and many powerful stories, that together can truly have an impact on the world that we want to create.

As Rabbi Hillel said, *“Im ein ani li, mi li?” “If I am not for myself who will be for me?”*  
*“U'kh'she'ani le'atzmi, mah ani?” “If I am only for my self, what am I?”* *“V'im lo 'akhshav, eimatai?” “And, if not now, when?”*

As we enter this new year of 5770, may we all be crazy enough to think that we can bring about change and may G-d grant us the strength to do it. *Keyn y'hi ratzon. Gut shabbos and gut yontif.*