

WORLD AIDS DAY SHABBAT

World AIDS Day Drash by: Allan P. Gold
December 1, 2017



Shabbat Shalom to my fellow congregants and everyone who joined us to celebrate Shabbat and worship with our community.

I'm deeply honored to have this opportunity to speak to you on this day of commemoration of the AIDS epidemic. It is an opportunity for people worldwide to unite in the continuing fight against AIDS, show support for people living with HIV, and remember those who have died from an AIDS related illness. The first World AIDS day was in 1988, so this is the 30th one.

Since the beginning of the epidemic, more than 70 million people have been infected with the HIV virus and about 35 million people have died of HIV. Globally, some 37 million people were living with HIV at the end of 2016. About a million people died of AIDS last year.

When people go through a crisis such as the AIDS epidemic there is hardly a chance to reflect on the meaning of it. With the passage of time, and in my case, the gift of time, I can now consider all that my experiences meant to me and share them with you.

There are many ways to approach powerful topics such as this, but I always find, in my work as a school psychologist and in my personal life that what is most moving is listening to personal narratives. Though each of us has a unique story, there are always commonalities and shared experiences that we can relate to and learn from.

For those of you, too young to remember, or who lived somewhere else, I hope you will be able to listen to my story and better understand the power and impact on individuals and our community.

So, imagine it is 1982. I was 36 then, in the third year of my first serious, long-term gay relationship. Earlier in the year we heard about GRID, gay related immune deficiency disease and it is now called AIDS. I remember at first thinking only very sexually active, promiscuous men would get this strange disease. I thought, I'm a nice Jewish boy – I don't have anything to worry about. And then our congregant, Mark Feldman, announced that he was diagnosed with it. The glass bubble was shattered. At the time Sha'ar Zahav was only five years old. We were in the throes of growing pains. It was also a time when the gay and Lesbian communities in San Francisco were not particularly involved with each other (and that might be putting it nicely). It was a time of adolescence as I view it for the gay community – enjoying the freedom of our sexual identity that was developed in the 60's and 70s. Bathhouses, gay bars, free sex – it was a time for experimentation and fun. And then, this, AIDS. At first we wanted to ignore it, go on as we were. But it began to get scary. As more and more cases were reported in big cities including San Francisco, we/I couldn't avoid it anymore. Sha'ar Zahav stepped up to the plate pretty early on. Mark Feldman started the "Phooey on

AIDS Fund” to raise money to support any members who might need support. When he passed away in 1983, the reality hit. This wasn’t going away. For many of us safe sex became a more common practice – for me in the beginning of 1984. I didn’t know it, but it was too late.

The AIDS epidemic became like watching a terror-laden movie. There was not only the horror of watching people get sick, and die, and having to deal with shock and grief, but being so frightened that I could be next. Up until the mid 80’s there were no tests to identify infection. One just had to wait and watch for symptoms – those purple Kaposi Sarcoma blotches, pneumococcal pneumonia, hairy leukoplakia – the fuzzy tongue, drenching night sweats. Close your eyes and imagine going to sleep every night and being terrified that you’d wake up soaking wet with a purple spot on some part of your body.

As more members of Sha’ar Zahav became ill, we began rallying together. Alan Harris started the Kaiser Brunch and Allan Berenstein faithfully continued it for years, where members would bring food to patients at Kaiser Hospital. The Bikkur Cholim Committee was formed to help each other out. The women in our community became our saviors; the love and support that they showed for all of us, was profound. Many men and women would get together to arrange transportation, food, and emotional support for our ailing members.

In 1984 the virus that causes AIDS was identified and named and in 1985 the first blood test to identify the virus was developed. In August 1986 I turned 40 and threw a big party for myself. My former roommate when I was in graduate school, Kurt Stutzman, a dear friend, couldn’t come, as he was too sick. He died the following January. When I look back at pictures from that birthday party, I tear up at how many have passed away from AIDS.

I had always wanted to be a father. As an only child of my elderly parents, who were 88 and 83 that year, I felt that this was my last chance to find a way to be a father. So in early September of 1986 I was tested and found out that I was HIV positive. I can’t say that my world crashed, but I went into a low key depression for about three years. Earlier that year I began my second significant relationship and the next year he found out that he was HIV positive, too. Not only would I not be able to father a child, but one or both of us could get sick and die. I was also faced with what to tell my parents. When I was eight years old, I got polio and I knew the horrible toll of worrying that took on them. I didn’t want to spoil their final years by having them worry constantly about me. So I kept my condition a secret.

Somehow, though, I found the strength to carry on. I tried to join support groups for HIV positive people, but they were too scary for me. All I could think of was – will that be me in months or years? So I stopped going. On the other hand working was healing for me – caring for children and parents and teachers – got my mind off of my own condition and allowed me to ignore the Sword of Damocles, at least during the day. I read all of the information about potential treatments and remember taking this icky lipid mixture,

AL 721 every day, which supposedly might help stave off the illness. In 1987 AZT was approved as the first treatment drug and I began taking it in 1988. By 1989 and I was still healthy, I began to believe that I might survive. But my relationship was stressful and difficult as we both struggled with our own health and the increasing number of friends who became sick.

Somehow I found the strength to direct my energy not only to do good at work, but to give back to Sha'ar Zahav. In 1991 I became the first two-year President. In the first three or four months of my term of office 13 members passed away. Going to funerals became a heartwrenching routine. That year my dear friend, former roommate and Sha'ar Zahav member, David Gass (who happened to be a star in our Megillah Madness production, Polyester in 1986), became very seriously ill. We had lived together for a few years in 1985 to 1986 and then he was a tenant at my parents' apartment. He had to move to Hospice for the last two weeks of his life and he died on World AIDS Day, today, in 1991.

I finally told my parents about my HIV status in the early 90's but assured them that I was feeling ok. By that time both were in their 90's. My mother would live until 1996 when she died at 93 and my father until December 2, 2002, when he was almost 105. They were able to live on with the knowledge that I could get sick, and they modeled the strength that I needed for myself.

The crisis continued and I lost more and more friends, including two more men, who rented rooms in my house. One was a former graduate student of mine, Jim Stahlaker and another an old friend of my first partner and mine, Jim Coffey. Don Albert, President of Sha'ar Zahav in the 80's passed away in 1996 or 7. There was not one member who was not touched by AIDS.

The stress to both my partner and me dealing with HIV was too much for our relationship and we parted in 1994. I continued on anyway and not being ready to quit this world, I advertised in a gay newspaper in 1995 as an HIV positive man to try to find another relationship. Alan Ferrara answered my ad and we met that summer and have been together ever since. The great irony of our relationship is that his beloved partner, Rabbi John Weisinger, had passed away from AIDS in Chicago in 1992. Alan moved here to get away from the grief of all of his losses there. Friends told him not to get involved with another HIV positive person, but he ignored that and chose me, anyway.

By 1995 new retroviral drugs were invented and I was able to take those and maintain my health. Since 1988 I have participated in a UCSF study with Dr. Jay Levy for long-term survivors. I have taken numbers of different medications and am immensely grateful that I have survived and have been able to continue my productive life.

So what have I learned from this life-changing experience? I want to conclude with a couple of themes.

One is the idea of the silver lining:

Out of tragedy there sometimes come good things. This AIDS tragedy is no different. One early benefit was the coming together and healing of the rift between the gay male and Lesbian communities, not only here, but all over the country. The support and gratitude that ensued from this healing made a great and lasting difference, not only to our addressing the AIDS crisis, but in together promoting LGBTQ rights.

For my personal silver-linings, had I had children of my own, I might not have been nearly as involved with and close to my beloved godson, Daniel Meyer-O'Keeffe, who for the past almost 24 years has really been like a son to me.

Had my friend David Gass not passed away, I would probably not be close to his sister, Arlene, who calls me the brother of her heart. We love her three daughters, like they were my real nieces. David never had a chance to know them, as Arlene was pregnant with her first child when David died.

My experience of fear, grief, and loss, has helped me so much professionally. Because of what I have been through I developed an understanding and empathy for the struggles that parents and children go through. Because of the compassion I have developed in caring for friends and dealing with my own emotions, teachers, parents, and children feel safe to share their own inner thoughts and feelings with me.

My greatest silver lining was my meeting Alan. Back in 1996 when we first went to Chicago we visited John's grave. I started to cry and told Alan that if John hadn't passed away we wouldn't be together. As unfair as that seemed, I didn't feel guilt, but gratitude that we could be together and that I could provide him new love and hope. I mentioned earlier of the irony of Alan's choosing me, an HIV positive man with the possibility of his having to take care of me one day. And then he gets Parkinsons Disease in 2003 and I take care of him. While I'm not always the most patient caregiver, my experience of caring and loving my AIDS friends taught me the blessings of caring.

The other lesson I've learned from my HIV/AIDS experience is resilience. I talk to kids often about the meaning of resilience and what a critically important life skill that is. How to deal with frustration, disappointment, getting rejected by a friend, even tragedy, such as the loss of a parent is so important to keep us going. I've learned how to focus on the present rather than the future, and worry less about what could happen than what I can do now and what I'm thankful for now. Part of resilience is being able to harness and channel our anger and grief, to value or personal action to try to change what needs changing. By focusing on tikkun olam, rather than wallowing in pain and despair, we can make a difference and restore our sense of empowerment. Whether we take political action, raise money, or take care of others on a very personal or one-to-one level – all of those embody resilience and keep us going.

In conclusion, I am incredibly grateful to be alive, that I have survived so far with my HIV positive status, not to mention the other bullets of polio and prostate cancer. I am thankful every day that I still have the energy to work, to support Alan, Daniel, my friends, my synagogue.

I hope that my own personal story has resonated with you and given you a better understanding of one person's experience of this devastating epidemic. I hope that we can all take a moment to remember those friends or relatives we have lost as well as the millions of people still living with HIV/AIDS and not forget that we can still help by supporting AIDS organizations for medical research, for education to protect young people and prevent the spread of HIV, and to develop final vaccines and cures once and for all.

Thank you so much for allowing me to speak tonight. Shabbat Shalom