

Parashat Shemot
Friday 12/27/02
Drash by Cantorial Soloist Fran Chalin

Beth Chayim Chadashim, Los Angeles

Many of you have, in the last year, said good bye to loved ones and family, and we your congregation have been there to help you in what ever way we could. Judaism gives us a complete blueprint for how to function as a community in the face of death. The mourners need not think about what is expected of them, from the moment of death, to the burial, to the first week afterward, to the next month, to the first year, and on each anniversary, our religion provides the mourner with an explanation of the tasks necessary. And we the comforters, are also instructed as to our role regarding the care of the mourner. We too are instructed as to the proper role of the comforter, with special emphasis on how not to act, as in we are instructed NOT to ask the mourner, how are you doing, or how are you feeling, for one whole month following the death. It makes sense doesn't it, what could the response possibly be?

So why so much proscription? For the mourner it makes sense, they're in shock, they've lost a part of themselves, they need guidance. They need to know that we as a community don't expect them to function as they had before.

But what about the comforters, why do we need so many rules governing our behavior? The answer lies in the very essence of Judaism – preservation of community. The actions of the comforter insures that the mourner is not excluded from the community. It would be so easy for that to happen because death can leave the community feeling scared, not knowing what to do, feeling helpless, uncomfortable, awkward, as well as forced into remembering and feeling again the pain of our own losses.

Our laws and customs give us a way of marking change while keeping the mourner an intact member of the community. There are rituals to say goodbye to those who have died and rituals for welcoming the mourner back into our midst, welcoming her back knowing that life will now be different. Honoring his place in our community, and reassuring him that we his community are still here. In fact, Jewish practice keeps us connected to one another while acknowledging that, a change, a monumental change has taken place. The rituals following death can and do strengthen and deepen our current relationships. The way we treat one another following a death are often the ties that bind us to those we love in a richer and deeper way.

Think of all the rituals, the community gatherings to acknowledge the change in someone's life, while binding them to the community: Brit, brit bat, B'nay mitzvah, wedding, death to name a few. Note even that a Jewish divorce, which should be done in the presence of community serves to acknowledge that a person's relationship to themselves, their partner and the community has changed.

We lack the same binding rituals for members of our community whose lives are changed by prolonged illness which transform who they are, what they are now capable of, and how they relate to those they love. Last week I was talking to someone who has been suffering with long term pain. She was sharing through tears that she fears that her

friends are getting fed up with listening to her complain about something that doctors now say has little chance of ever going away. My response was to her was not that her friends were tired of listening to her, but they felt so inadequate because there was nothing that they could do to fix her, to make her go back to who she had been, and their own feelings of inadequacy were pulling them away. They don't know how to be with her now. In a sense a death has taken place, a death of who she has been, and no one has marked it. There has been no grieving period. No letting go period, no way to welcome this person back into the community as a changed individual. And her whole life has changed. How she functions at home, what her partner can expect from her, what her partner now must take on. What her friends can now expect, what they now need to do on her behalf. She needs, and those in her world need a way to grieve that which was lost. There needs to be a letting go before anything new can take its place, or else what happens next is always tied to and possibly compared to what can now not be.

I remember back to the height of the AIDS crisis. Our community rallied hard and fast to help those who were dying, their loved ones and families. We worked endlessly to make sure that no one was alone, not the ill and not the dying and not those mourning their deaths. We looked to our Jewish practices and they gave us the structure in which to respond. Our community was strengthened. We were the model for the rest of the Jewish world, this is what you do for those who are gravely ill and dying. This is what community means. But then something happened and less people were dying, more were living with HIV and AIDS. I think we had less in the way of a Jewish ritual in place to help direct us in this different stage of our community. Who were we now, how would we mark our own change so that we the living, the ever changed, but living, could go on. I'm not sure we ever did that and I think as a result, many of us are still lost.

And I see that now as we try as a community to cope with those in our midst who are different as a result of physical and emotional illnesses, that we don't know what to do. Yes the laws which surround Bikkor Cholim, visiting the sick, tell us not to forget the sick, to make sure they know they are still important, that we still think of them, but how is it that we think of them? As they were? It's interesting that our language doesn't readily give us the words we need to reflect this phenomenon. We have language for death and dying, for getting sick and getting better, but not so much for getting sick and what, not recovering? That's not accurate, it doesn't reflect the transformation which often occurs. And it doesn't give those in our life a new way in which to relate.

A dear friend in my life Sandy Diamond aliva sholem was fond of saying that we are all of us temporarily able bodied. I think that this is harder to face than knowing that all of us will die. The fear of disability, is for many, greater than the fear of death. All the more so that we need to give thought to rituals which will help to hold us to those we love as we change. And our loved ones need also to be a part and to take part as our illness also changes their life. Some of this has begun to happen—The feminist Jewish community and the queer Jewish community has taken some scary life changes, such as menopause and turning 60 and created Jewish communal ritual to mark their passing. Members of our community who have survived cancer mark their transition within the context of their Jewish community.

Perhaps this is why our BCC Bikor Cholim committee is having trouble. We get the bring

a meal part, and we do it. We do visit each other when illness occurs. But then what? What happens after the soup? This is the conversation we need to have. Please talk with me or the rabbi, but definitely with each other regarding how our community will create a caring community ready to assist each other through....what? Language fails, but we won't. We know that ritual, especially public ritual plays an important part in helping us to face change. We need to help our religion help us face our lives with the knowledge that we are not alone and won't be left behind.

I invite you all to read or reread this week's parasha, the beginning of the book of Exodus. The most significant sentence in Shemot for me this time around was G-d's response when Moses asked G-d, what is the name I should tell the Israelites when they ask, what is the name of this G-d? and G-d replies Ehyeh asher ehyeh. There is so much commentary written about the tense of this sentence. It is translated I am that I am, I will be who I will be, but others have translated it as, I will be what tomorrow demands. G-d tells us in this self naming that things will change, and I G-d, will change to face what comes next. I G-d, know that you will change, and I can and will become that which you need. I Fran, take such comfort in this, knowing that even G-d knows that tomorrow will inevitably mean change, but fear not, you will not be alone. I pray then that we learn ways to help one another to understand and accept that together we will become what we need to be, to move forward together.

Shabbat Shalom