

“Living with Vulnerability and Impermanence”

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Once upon a time our people were farmers. In fact, each of our holidays harken back to a time when an agrarian economy was the core of our lives: we lived and died by the rainfall and our harvest. We needed to live in huts, portable dwelling places, sukkot, so that we didn't waste any time walking home from our fields. Rather, we were eating, drinking and living in a sukkah to ensure our own survival.

Times, as they say, have changed. That experience of using the Sukkah for a temporary dwelling while collecting your produce hasn't been true in millenia. What we're left with is an artifact in the form of the Sukkah, this temporary dwelling space, that we are asked to spend time in every year. The space has evolved to include more stipulations in terms of how it should be build, but more importantly, when we inherit a tradition we must ask the question: how does this experience adds meaning to our lives? What is the point in 2016 of us sitting and dwelling in these booths?

Consider one answer: the sukkah requires vulnerability and impermanence. The requirement that the *s'chach*; the covering over

our sukkah needs to have enough holes that you can see the stars, and hopefully not feel the rain. The requirement that our sukkah be a temporary structure, knowing that it needs to be built after Yom Kippur and taken down again after Simchat Torah. The requirement that we do all this as it's getting colder and wetter, asking each of us to interact with the world in all our weakness and vulnerability; hoping all that time that like sukkot: this is only temporary.

I don't know if I really appreciated that sense of impermanence, that feeling of vulnerability until last year. Last year a week before Rosh Hashanah at a routine breast exam, Kate's doctor felt a lump and wanted her to have it biopsied. Last year on Sukkot I was sitting in a doctor's office next to her, trying to understand how life had changed so irrevocably in a matter of days; feeling as if everything in my life was just as permeable as the roof of the Sukkah. I was trying to understand what this new year would mean, a year filled with chemotherapy, radiation, and surgery; a year where we felt exposed to the elements; a year we hoped would feel as short as those seven days in the Sukkah.

It was Kate who was sick, Kate who experienced this yet, illnesses like this affected everyone in our family. Today I share with you that feeling of helplessness and anger that flowed through me as I watched her struggle through her diagnosis and treatment for

breast cancer. The feelings of indecision: am I better off at work or at home? What do I say to my sons when they want their mom to pick them up, Micah who couldn't even understand as she was diagnosed when he was 10 months old, and Benji who was just a snotty 3 year old who couldn't appreciate it? How can I maintain some semblance of control when everything feels outside of my control?

In some ways, it helped that I was not alone. She was not alone. We have been and continue to be surrounded by family and friends and a caring community. Yet she also walked this road with countless other women. According to statistics: "About 1 in 8 U.S. women (about 12%) will develop invasive breast cancer over the course of her lifetime. In 2016, an estimated 246,660 new cases of invasive breast cancer are expected to be diagnosed in women in the U.S."¹

Of course that's just the general population. Kate, like most Jewish women in the United States is descended from Ashkenazi Jews. Young Jewish women are far more likely to be affected by this disease at a younger age, and the devastating impact that has on a person and a family. Nothing brings that more into focus that each time we walked into our oncologists office, and we'd look around and see everyone was 30 years older than us or more.

¹www.breastcancer.org/symptoms/understand_bc/statistics

One of our partner organizations this evening is Sharsheret, a Jewish community support organization focusing on supporting young women living through Breast cancer, as they note: “One in 40 Ashkenazi (Eastern European) Jews carries a BRCA gene mutation, nearly 10 times the rate of the general population, making Jewish families significantly more susceptible to hereditary breast cancer and ovarian cancer.”² “This means in a group of 100 women without a BRCA1/2 mutation, about eight will develop breast cancer by age 70 (about 12 by age 85). While in a group of 100 women with a BRCA1/2 mutation, between 45 and 65 will develop breast cancer by age 70.”³

I know so many of you know these statistics. We are here tonight recognizing Breast cancer awareness month, and awareness of this disease has never been higher, thanks to the efforts of so many foundations. Rather, I want to look back at sukkot, this holiday of impermanence, this holiday of fragility, and see what else it comes to teach us, especially as it is a holiday that mandates joy. It’s known by the rabbis as Zman Simchateinu, the season of our Joy. Even though we are reminded of our own fragility, even though for me it will always be the season Kate was diagnosed which lifts up the cruelty of

² <http://www.sharsheret.org/how-we-help/women-all-ages/at-risk-brca-positive>

³ <http://www5.komen.org/BreastCancer/AshkenaziJewishHeritage.html>

life, the words we read are Kohelet, Ecclesiastes, a book that at its core I believe encourages us to face that fragility and to find joy.

One of the most famous lines comes from the second verse: Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.(1:2). Rabbi Jonathan Sacks attempts to invert that classic line by pointing out that the word vanity or in Hebrew *Hevel* could mean something else: a breath. As he notes:

“The word *hevel* signifies the fragility of life, as if to say that the entire horizon of our experience is bounded by a mere breath. That insubstantial puff of air is all that separates us from death. *Hevel* is the almost-nothing which is life itself...

[However he continues:] Ecclesiastes is a song of life – life in and of itself, frail, transitory, vulnerable, but all there is...God has given us one thing – life – and too many of our human strivings lead away from it. Life is the breath of God that transforms the handful of dust, and we serve God by celebrating it...”⁴

As Moses reminded us in Deuteronomy: Choose life, don't dwell on death or sorrow. It was this charge in mind, this way of looking at the world that reminds us what is truly important, that brought me to this verse from Ecclesiastes:

⁴ <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/160427>

Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which God has given to you under the sun; for this is your reward in life and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun. (9:9)

How fitting. This verse rings so true for this season and for every Sukkot to come: regardless of whether you or a loved one has been afflicted with pain or illness: life is fleeting; we must all choose life and search for joy. I found joy in Benji and Micah even as we were struggling through this year. I found joy in spending time with Kate, when we were both able to smile about having the same haircut. I found joy in this community that surrounded me with love and support every step of the way. Life can be hard, it's certainly not for the faint of heart. Yet we do have a choice when we are faced with a problem: to dwell on the pain or to find the joy and celebrate life.