

3 days ago I realized that the speech I wrote for this Bat Mitzvah in no way revealed what had impelled me to embark on this journey. It did not reveal my core tension--how being a doctor for AIDS patients made me feel complicit and how my search and discovery of faith was inspired by the example of my patients. So, this speech, composed in the last two days--and finished this morning is a more personal, from the heart explanation of why I chose to do this.

So why did I do this? In response to an increasing awareness over the years that my life, my choices, everything I do is enmeshed in a wider world and that my personal decency neither excludes my unwitting complicity with injustice nor guarantees that my children will be immune from the consequences of that injustice. This recognition, no doubt, derives from the legacy of the pervasive but unspoken presence of the holocaust in this Washington Heights Inwood neighborhood, where I grew up.

I became a doctor with the naive notion that I would be able to participate in a morally unambiguous endeavor for the unequivocal good of patients. But what I have come to recognize more and more is that so much of illness is rooted in injustice. So being a doctor sometimes seems absurdly irrelevant. Even worse is the sense of profiting from the preventable misery of others since I earn my living from a steady stream of new HIV-infected customers. This has created a profound unease for me--hence the search for some way to righteousness.

When I started out in medicine, I viewed social marginalization and medical disease as completely unrelated--whereas now I see the two as inextricably linked. I took it for granted in my early years that some people were just poor and ignorant and stupid and I never wondered why or felt responsible for or connected to those "other" people. Honestly, I even had contempt for seemingly stupid patients. I was particularly galled once by a young man who came into the ED complaining that he was coughing up cold. I kept asking him, What do you mean, coughing up cold? He just kept repeating with escalating rage, "I be coughing up cold." In my head I was berating him that cold is an adjective not a noun. Finally, in a glimmer of insight, I asked him what color was his cold and he told me, that it was green cold, real ugly thick green cold. He meant phlegm. I felt frightened by his rage--because I understood that the rage was legitimate--and that it had to be targeted somewhere, why *not* at me? My contempt is gone now, having been replaced by understanding, affection and admiration.

Day by day, my patients and I talk, and we develop relationships--mutual relationships. I hope I give to them as much inspiration and wisdom as I get from them. My patients' stories, their lives, their struggles and their triumphs and defeats have been a profound education for me. In my early days, I really could not understand why patients did "stupid" things like have unsafe sex or not finish HS or do drugs. I did not feel in any way connected to or responsible for or complicit with the circumstances that endanger and marginalize individuals. But with time, and a lot of listening I came to understand that nothing comes from nowhere. HIV, a disease that seems only to affect "other" people spreads as a result of ignorance, complicity and complacency. I cannot help seeing the parallel to Pharaoh in the parsha. Pharaoh was insulated by his power and

thus indifferent to the plight of the Jews and even to the plight of the Egyptians during the prior plagues. The parsha tells of Pharaoh's intransigent refusal to unconditionally free the Jews despite increasingly onerous plagues directed against the Egyptian people. But it took something as personal as the slaying of the first born to shake Pharaoh's illusion of his own invulnerability to human suffering. Pharaoh finally relented, freed the Jews and recognized the greatness of Adonai. When AIDS becomes personal, complacency stops. Of course, when AIDS becomes personal, it is too late for the victim, the victim's family and community--but it is not too late for this generation to tell and learn from the story.

We tell and retell of the Passover story to our children. But why do we teach that particular story? Why do we dwell on such a low point in the history of the Jewish people? Why is it so important to remember slavery and humiliation? Because freedom, liberation and the greatness of God cannot be understood without the context of its opposites--slavery, humiliation and the absence of faith.

Victor Frankl, who himself survived a Nazi concentration camp, wrote in his essay, *Man's Search for Meaning*, that people struggle to live even under the worst circumstances when there is a meaning to their lives and their suffering. This is for me an extremely inspiring message which I have tried to give to my patients. The Passover tale merits repetition year after year because the legacy of enslavement and liberation *has* a value and a meaning. Those who know slavery can understand freedom and those who have endured humiliation can be the most credible champions for justice. Further, that the liberation requires action and faith on the part of human beings is both a challenge and an inspiration to contemporary Jews.

Alice Walker wrote to her daughter, "Who saw in me what I considered a scar, and redefined it as a world"--meaning that our worst shame can be our greatest gift. Alice Walker was accidentally injured by her brothers' beebee gun. The deformed eye was a source of intense shame, especially since she was forced to collude in a story that falsely blamed her for the accident. The ugly eye though, turned her inward, to writing. Later surgery replaced the eye. One day, her baby daughter compared her mother's eye to the image of a floating blue earth on some TV show they watched and made the remark, "Mommy, who put that world in your eye?" So I have tried to inspire my patients to exploit their scar as a source of strength--just as the Passover story of slavery and liberation is a source of inspiration.

I have learned from my patients that hope and faith are as necessary as medicine. That has been the spiritual journey that led me to the Torah. My patients pray and go to church and don't feel embarrassed to talk about God. They believe in miracles. They say things like "Amen" and "Have a blessed day." And now when I arrange their follow-up appointments, I say "God willing." --meaning we are all in this together, at the mercy of forces bigger than both of us. My patients have all kinds of faith--but I hope they are not just humoring when we both look at the ceiling of the exam room and agree that our faiths are more the same than different. We have had many miracles in our clinic. Most of the miracles have been of our own making--without divine intervention--but

rooted in a fundamental belief in ourselves and in something bigger than us that impels toward good.

The parsha asks us to consecrate our first born to God. My children, I have spent more time studying Torah these last few months than attending to you. I have done it because I feel that you are consecrated to a world I am complicit in creating. For your sake more than any, I want to see a just and safe world. This is my way of consecrating you to God.

We are one congregation today composed that is composed of many faiths. I have invited you, my many friends, because I believe that collectively we share a faith in the ability for the human spirit to move toward justice and righteousness.

Thank you to all my friends and family.

Thank you to my late father. Today's parsha Bo is the same one that fell on his 13th birthday in 1935. I am wearing his tallit, which he always kept in a special drawer with a very dog eared siddur and his WWII dog tag.

Thank-you the late Vali Steiner, my best friend's mother, who survived the holocaust with her humanity intact. My friend emailed me that she could not be with in person today but would be with me anyway--and that her gift would arrive on Wed or Thurs. Her gift is the yod I used today.

Thank-you Lori for staying up so late last night and helping express what I wanted to say.

Thank you Rabbi Gale for letting me do it my way--up to the last minute.

Thank you Joan Laufer--who welcomed me to HT the very first time.

Thank-you Rita, Rosellen, and Ruth for being my regular synagogue buddies.

Thank-you Mitch and Susan for always being ready and able to help me.

Thank you David Dechamps for music which speaks more than words.

Thank you so much Cantor Pincus for embarking on this journey with me, responding to my casual remark, "Gee I would like to learn that," with "Ok, I could teach you" and for this intense half year of study.

Most of all, thanks to my family--my incredible husband who is my rock, to my mother for teaching me her values, and to my children, Lee, Lori and Abby--who are the real reason I am doing this. I hope you will tell your children too.

Shabbat Saholom!