

Rabbi Lisa Edwards

BCC 11/30/07, eve of World AIDS Day

Shabbat Vayeishev, Ruach Chayim

“Ties that Bind”

When I can't get to the book, I sometimes just read reviews. Gives me a taste of it at least, and often quotes what I assume to be the most memorable lines.

This, I guess, is what most people do with Torah too – few of us get to the whole book, which means I suppose, that I'm one of the reviewers.

Recently I read a review of Shalom Auslander's new book, **Foreskin's Lament: A Theological Appraisal**. I'm pretty sure I'll never read this book. Even in small doses Auslander is a bit much for me. But I was struck by one of the presumably “most memorable” lines noted by the reviewer: Explaining that a nurse at his son's birth remarks that it is sad that he is not on speaking terms with his family, Auslander answers “not as sad as if I *were* speaking to them.”

This week in Torah we read in *Vayeishev* the beginnings of the Joseph saga – of how his father doted on him, dressed him in a coat of many colors, loved him best. The Torah tells us that “His brothers saw that it was Joseph whom their father loved most of all his brothers, so they *hated* Joseph; and they could not speak to him peaceably.” [Genesis 37:4].

The story of Joseph and his brothers is sad too for the fact that their father Jacob - by playing favorites and thus prompting life-threatening sibling rivalry - is merely passing along what he learned from his own parents – Isaac and Rebekah – who from day one pitted him against his twin brother Esau.

I was blessed to come from a family that didn't play favorites, but I've certainly seen and heard that parental favoritism, as well as children favoring one parent over another is common in families. Several years ago on a Friday night I shared with you a survey that revealed that 80% of mothers interviewed admitted they favored one of their children over the others. The same study showed that 90% of the children of those mothers knew their mother did favor one kid, but got it wrong as to which kid she favored! Is that called Overcompensating? I'm not sure... but in the weeks after I mentioned this research to you, there was a sudden upsurge in the boxes of Kleenex gone through in my study – I had so many folks come to talk with me about how mom always like their brother bestor related topics.

The sad reality of family dynamics and love in general is of course part of what is compelling about

the book of Genesis – it is not just the genesis of the world and of the Jewish people, but it reminds us that where there are humans there is family and where there is family there is family life and family strife . . .and love too if we're lucky.

Tomorrow is World AIDS day, a day set aside every year since 1989.

Some years, as it does this year, when WORLD AIDS day falls around the time of reading these sad family chronicles of Genesis, I can't help but think of some of the people with AIDS I knew – especially in the early years – whose families turned away when they became ill. The stories we could tell – of acting out instead of ACTing UP, of disowning children, or perhaps worse – of breaking up gay couples who in those days (and still most places today) had no legal right to make health care decisions or later to inherit homes and possessions they'd shared. I remember people widowed, bereft of lover and property, some of them sick themselves, left by family to fend for themselves or intruded upon by estranged family, who stole their lover and their homes from them.

In weeks to come, as we continue our reading of the Joseph saga and the book of Genesis -- or as I continue to review it for you! – there will be real learning, real reconciliation, real growth among these brothers. That's the advantage of re-reading the same book every year – you know to look forward to the growth and change that happen.

So it is with World AIDS day too – like reading Torah over again every year, a day like this allows us not only to mark time (26 years since AIDS came into the world), but also this day in particular -- World AIDS day – allows us not only to see what hasn't changed, to take sad note that AIDS is still a plague in our time, but also allows us to take note of what has changed.

In the not distant future our friend Itay Seigel will be speaking to us here about the current status of AIDS in the world, and what we can do to help these days in the struggle against it. Tonight, on the eve of World AIDS day, our reflection on families includes a *nechemta* too – an uplift.

Though families facing AIDS and HIV don't always respond with embrace or with love, we know that many do, and we would be remiss not to remember them as well. I remember the first time I saw the AIDS quilt spread out on the lawn in Washington, D.C. in 1987. I remember walking the rows in tears, reading the panels, learning the stories – the quilt is Torah too, telling the stories of our people – and the quilt is the opposite of the *sad* stories I mentioned earlier. Oh, the sorrow is there indeed, each panel is someone who died, but the difference is that each panel is a *loved* one who died – panels, art pieces lovingly created by family – no sibling rivalry there, no parental favoritism, no family feuds – lovers, friends, siblings, parents, children – people came together over those quilt pieces and sewed together life after life – portraits of people loved unto, and beyond,

death.

And World AIDS day allows us time not just to remember the ones we lost, but to remember and celebrate those alive – living with HIV/AIDS, and those working to prevent its spread, or to eradicate it altogether. World AIDS day – like AIDS walks and lifecycle rides – allows us a moment in time to look around and see how much better it is.

I remember years ago already – though I don't remember which year it was – when on World AIDS day we marked a whole year that no BCC member had died of complications from AIDS. I remember the year the cocktails brought so many BCCers back to life that, thanks to Avram Chill, we changed the *amidah* prayer back to the traditional wording:

Baruch atah Adonai m'khaiyeh ha-meitim

Blessed are you God who restores the dead to life.

On World AIDS day I remember Bracha's *V'ahavta* prayer – the one we read earlier tonight. While researching her masters thesis on the effects of HIV/AIDS on the sibling congregations of BCC and MCCLA, she came across photos of a particular mezuzah – a test tube filled with HIV+ blood - created by AIDS activist and artist Al Winn. Inspired by the stories she was hearing, and the power & symbolism of Al's radical mezuzah, Bracha wrote:

Bind these words as a sign upon your arm

so that you may fight against prejudice,

between your eyes

so that you may not be blind to the suffering of others,

and write them on the doorposts of your homes and gates so that you remind yourself and others that intolerance will not be tolerated within these walls.

Some years ago World AIDS Day was widely observed as a day without art. Museums covered their art works, Broadway shows closed down for a night - not for a stage hands strike - but to remember how many creators, how many artists of all kinds we had lost to AIDS.

Tomorrow night – on World AIDS Day - our community will gather over at the auditorium at Temple Emanuel, not for an evening without music, but an evening *with* music – as we honor Fran Chalin, BCC's cantorial soloist for the last 15 years, upon her retirement from BCC. And among the beautiful music we'll hear tomorrow night a particular song will be sung in tribute for World AIDS Day – to remember those lost, and to breathe deeply in the company of the family we have created here who in those early days -and still -gathers around when a member is ailing. Among the first volunteer work Fran ever did at BCC was to organize and host the monthly dinners we used to hold

right here in this sanctuary for People With AIDS and their families.

In 1989, UNAIDS (the joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS) declared December 1st “World Aids Day.” At a ceremony for its inception, then Secretary-General of the United Nations, Javier Perez de Cuellar described the world’s steadfast commitment to combating what would ultimately become one of the most deadly killers of the last quarter century. He said at the time “*until AIDS is resolved for all people, it is resolved for none of us.*”¹

On World AIDS day we need take note the battles are far from over. And to take note that it is time to re-enter the fray, to re-commit ourselves to work toward prevention and eradication of the plague, and to make new concerted efforts to care for those living with the complications.

And it’s time too to look around and know that *here* the family ties are not ones that bind or bruise; at BCC we do not inflict wounds, we help *heal* them.

Will you read with me the *misheberach* for those dealing with HIV/AIDS, and as we read will you commit in your heart to re-new your participation in the struggle?

A Mishebeirach for those dealing with HIV/AIDS

By Mark Israel and Dan Polish

God who blessed our ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel, be with all of those who struggle with AIDS, whose health has been impaired by this illness and whose lives have been placed in jeopardy. Give them courage and strength to face their illness and hope for a cure that will embrace them in life.

May your healing presence remain with those who have contracted HIV. Through your caring and the wisdom You have imparted to human healers they have been enabled to succeed in their struggle with their disease. Keep them on the path of Health and life.

Be with those who care for people with AIDS and attend to their needs. Bless them with strength and compassion as they labor to ease the lives of those who look to them for comfort and well-being. Let them know the value of their labors, and assist them in their noble work.

Share your wisdom with those searching for an ultimate cure for this disease. Bestow your healing knowledge upon them and reward their efforts with fulfillment.

Bless all of us with compassion and understanding that we may see all those afflicted as You see them: not as recipients of some sort of retribution, but as worthy objects of our concern and love.

¹ November 23, 2007 13 Kislev 5768

May the day come speedily when this scourge too, like so many before it will not afflict Your children and all of us are liberated from the shadow of its terror.

Amen.

Shabbat shalom