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Yom Kippur Symposium

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In 2009, I was pregnant with our first daughter when I stood above the steps leading into the *mikveh*. After years of study, private and at Beth Israel, and months of preparation, I was converting to Judaism. With my husband Michael and Rabbi Scott standing in witness, the room was full of light and the still water before me. And when I submerged in the *mikveh* waters, the water held up both me and my baby in its own kind of womb, where I began a new relationship with God. As a new writer, not yet published widely and still searching for a creative practice, plus on the verge of becoming a new mother, it felt stabilizing to know we would find ritual and joy in establishing a Jewish household for our new family.

As Michael and I entered this part of our lives together as parents, I knew that raising a Jewish family would shape who I was and how I interacted with the world, but I did not know how—or how it would sustain our family in the worst of times and make our joy seven-fold in times of happiness. Michael and I had met as college sweethearts in 2000 at Rice University, where he endured reading my poetry and short stories and I endured his long bouts of writing computer code to create the masterpiece of say, a spinning rose on his computer screen, a computer nerd's version of romantic creativity. It was the love of opposites, a poet and a problem solver, the perfect scenario for two obsessive personalities with a curiosity for learning and growing, and the dream of one day having our own family.

What we did not know as we became parents to our daughter Maya, and then again to our younger children, Lily and Carlos, was how Judaism would sustain us and help us create a strong family life. After I gave birth to Maya, I struggled with the battle of postpartum depression, searching for a way to be the best kind of mother I could without knowing how I'd do it. Shabbat, family shabbat events at Beth Israel, Jewish day school, as well as celebrations at the Purim carnival and the rituals of holidays, became a constant touchstone for us during dark

moments. No matter how we felt, or how much we struggled, we knew that Shabbat would come, that there would be gatherings at the temple, prayer, and community, and the assurance that Maya was growing up in the warmth of a Jewish community--not just at Beth Israel but through programs at the Jewish Community Center and then as a toddler at the Shlenker School. It was only through the support of the community, my counseling with the Rabbi, connections to resources, and finding words in the Torah that provided hope and healing, that Michael and I were able to figure out how to meet this first major challenge in our lives.

Our struggles as a family changed course in the following years when I faced difficult pregnancies, spending months on bed rest at home or in the hospital, and feeling grateful, finally when our children were born healthy and seeing their faces made every second of struggle worth it. People in the Jewish community helped our children, nurtured and cared for them, and the community as a whole gave us stability and our children a place of certainty when our lives were in flux.

Our children have now grown and continue to grow in the Jewish community at Beth Israel, through religious school and Shabbat services, holidays and gatherings. Even as I've developed an autoimmune condition that is sometimes debilitating, and most recently, struggled with the long-term effects of what was most likely COVID-19, I have come to appreciate in newfound ways the celebration of Shabbat in our home, the ritual and looking forward to holidays and seasons on the Jewish calendar. For six years, I have also found joy through teaching in Beth Israel's Religious School, teaching Judaics to first and second graders, and more recently, art to all grade levels, which included having my children as my own students.

My greatest joy as a religious person is using creativity to honor the sanctity of human life—either by practicing art with children, volunteering at the jewelry beading class at Seven Acres, or in my practice as an artist. My journey as a Jewish woman has helped me grow as an artist because it has given me permission to question and challenge my initial ideas and beliefs, to

create my own internal midrash, and to chart my journeys in poetry and other artistic expressions. I am the current Houston Poet Laureate, and have published collections of poetry, as well as published stories, nonfiction and more. Through this time of young parenthood, I found a way to flourish as a writer. Somehow, through a great amount of effort and persistence, and a wild belief in the worth of my writing and ideas, and with the reality that many writers have work that never get recognition or publication, I was able to publish four collections of poetry, as well as publish stories and essays widely. My growth as a writer whose work deals with family, motherhood, and confronting illness, is inextricably linked to my life as a Jewish woman, and to embracing the questioning nature of the Jewish faith, the ability to re-interpret or re-examine stories in the Torah like Rabbis before us and create our own versions of midrash. I followed my sense of curiosity, and examined what could be questioned in my life, just as I learned and observed through my life as a Jewish woman.

I could not have persisted, both as a mother and in my personal endeavors, if we did not have the touchstone of Jewish education and ritual, to have the support of the Jewish community as we raised happy and healthy children who learned eagerly about Torah and the practices that called us to be better humans through the lessons of the Torah.

One of most testing challenges I faced over the past ten years was when I was having a difficult time walking or seeing clearly, a result of physical symptoms caused by my disease. I felt estranged from my very active family, with children at the stage where going outside to play was critical for their happiness. I remember sitting at services and hearing Rabbi Scott and Rabbi Lyon speak of the hardships in Torah, and it made me feel included in the history of human lives who struggled with personal and communal hardships. At a Sisterhood membership celebration, I clearly remember Rabbi Lyon speaking of the dignity of human life, no matter what physical abilities we have at any moment in our lives. The story he recounted was one of a family member suffering from a disease that left him with few physical abilities, and how he felt nourished and found joy “in his memories that kept him company.” I find it a very Jewish concept to believe that whatever present moment we live in, there is always value

to living—whether we are confined at home, in our body, or in spirit—there is always something to be held sacred in the reality of our lives. I learned that the present and its available joys cannot be dismissed by the thoughts for some greater future, but instead is from the very happiness we know and experience right where we are at, where we currently exist.

During this time of stay-at-home amidst the coronavirus pandemic, I had the opportunity to test this belief, and to practice it. The present, during these days, can feel, at the worst of times, overwhelmingly tedious and quite frankly, boring, and at the best of times, can feel freeing, as we enjoy the downtime and slow living without the rush of commutes and busy schedules. I ask myself during these times to find where my mind and body are free from confinement, what parts of my life are still blessed with joy and abilities—and how to teach these same ways of searching to my children. After contracting the virus in March, my recovery took months, at the end of which I could walk down our block and back to our house. Each week I would walk farther, and sometimes walk less the next—I had to accept whatever my body could give me. I am practicing acceptance for a new heart condition caused by the virus, and my life as a professional pro-tennis player and body builder is completely over. I am grateful for the sun on my face, the blue sky that meets us (most days) or the stormy one that comes to soften the heat. I am grateful that our son is a proud kindergartner, learning to read and deal with big emotions in a kindergarten way, and our eight-year-old daughter is braver on her bike. I am grateful that our oldest daughter, Maya, will enter an arts middle school with a new portfolio of comics, stories, and animations which her vibrant mind has created over the summer. I am grateful for the small moments Michael and I are able to share alone to watch shows that make us laugh, or make us think. It doesn't take much really, to be this happy, and it certainly doesn't happen in a situation devoid of extreme challenges. In the midst of the worst part of the virus, when I could not sit up, I felt comforted by the voices of my children, of their glee in dancing, their games (sometimes coordinated at midnight for a very important opportunity to build legos and create stories). I felt grateful for the care my husband gave me so that I could get better.

Each day is a chance to be with my family in a new way that cannot be repeated, and the end of each week we can celebrate Shabbat together to remind ourselves that, for this, we should be profoundly grateful. We have each other, the abilities and gifts given to us to use and enjoy, and when the pandemic passes, we will be in community with others again and find new ways to connect, just as we've stayed connected through the internet, texting and video apps. Its not possible to leave this challenge without the newfound appreciation for a heartfelt hand on the shoulder, a friendly hug, or hands on another friends' hand. I hope when it happens you enjoy it, even savor it, even if just for a moment, because these are the things that make up the present moments of our lives in ordinary times, and may we wish for more ordinary moments of connection that are cause for joy.

Shana Tovah to you all, and I hope very soon you are able to connect to others in the ways that are meaningful to you.