

D'var Torah
Kol Nidrei
"Ah, The Zusha Story"
Rabbi Steven Folberg
Congregation Beth Israel
Austin, Texas
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Dear Friends,

A few weeks ago, we held our first Sunday School session. It wasn't a full Sunday, but each class got an hour with their teacher to say hello. So, on opening day, I had a chance to hang out for about an hour with the Confirmation Class of 5784.

Before going into our "getting to know you" activity, I said to the kids, "Anybody at CBI who knows me well knows that teaching you guys is the most precious and soul satisfying thing I get to do around here, and since you are the last group of tenth graders I'm going to get to do this with, I'm especially excited about it. In fact, if I took ill, and my doctor said to me that I could only do one single thing at the temple until I got better, I would keep having class with you and ditch everything else, given the choice. That's how much I love being with you."

This reminds me that Carly Cera, our Director of Youth Education, asked me a few weeks ago to give a description of the Confirmation Class *curriculum*. That's a hard thing to do, but if forced to describe what the class is about, I'd say, "We are going to create a warm, friendly, fun community in which to learn stuff that Rabbi Folberg wants to make sure you know as you begin to edge your way into the adult world."

There are, therefore, certain themes and topics that we hit every year, such as, "What do we mean when we say the word God?" Or, "How can you effectively navigate being Jewish in a non-Jewish world?" Or, "If God is real, how do we understand tragedy and suffering?"

Now, any teacher who has been teaching a given course for a long time develops a collection of jokes and other *shtick* to be deployed at certain points in the curriculum. I'll confess that I'm quite attached to my perennial catalogue of bad puns and silly stories. In fact, I'd like to imagine that I could whip out my cell phone right now and call a former Confirmation student from, say, ten years ago, and ask them if they remember the joke I told about the problem of undeserved human suffering.

"Hi, Rachel," I'd say, "It's Rabbi Folberg. Do you remember back in Confirmation class when I diagrammed on the board the problem of theodicy, the fancy term for 'Why do bad things happen to good people?'"

And I fantasize that Rachel would say, "Yeah, I do remember that! You drew a Venn diagram illustrating the problem on the board, and then asked us, 'Do any of you know why they call that a Venn diagram?'"

And I would ask, "And, do you remember the correct answer?"

And in my dream they would respond without hesitation, "You told us it's called a Venn diagram because, '*Ven* you look at it, you understand things better.'"

Don't you wish you could be in tenth grade again?

Not so much a joke, but still in that category of "Stuff I want them to be familiar with because it contains Jewish wisdom that can help ground them in life," at some point in the year, we usually learn an essential piece of Jewish wisdom encapsulated in what's known as The Zusha Story.

Before I even *tell* The Zusha Story to the Confirmation students, I will explain that it's very important to know how to *respond properly* when someone *refers to* The Zusha Story in casual conversation (which, of course, regularly occurs in social situations here in Central Texas).

"Let's say you grow up to get a PhD in theoretical physics," I'll say, "and you end up on the UT faculty. And you're at a faculty tea, and you don't have tenure yet, so you want to make a good impression. So, the chair of the Physics Department, who happens to be Jewish, is making a subtle point about cosmology or the quantum field, when she pauses, looks off thoughtfully into the distance, and says, "You know, this aspect of string theory reminds me of The Zusha Story!" And if that happens, my Confirmation students, you need to know the proper response.

What is the proper response? While nodding thoughtfully, you say, "*Ah...* The Zusha Story!"

Just for fun, let's try that now: "You know, your point about black holes reminds me of The Zusha Story." Everybody? "Ah, The Zusha Story!"

The Zusha Story, is one of many stories told about an actual, historical figure named Reb Meshullam Zusha, from the Ukrainian town of Hanipol, a third-generation Hasidic leader known for his humility and his deep approach to prayer.

The Zusha story I want the Confirmation kids to know goes like this:

“When Rabbi Zusha was on his deathbed, his students found him in uncontrollable tears. They tried to comfort him by telling him that he was almost as wise as Moses and as kind as Abraham, so he was sure to be judged positively in Heaven. He replied, "When I pass from this world and appear before the Heavenly Tribunal, they won't ask me, 'Zusha, why weren't you as wise as Moses or as kind as Abraham,' rather, they will ask me, 'Zusha, why weren't you Zusha?' Why didn't I fulfill my potential, why didn't I follow the path that could have been mine?”

I want the teenagers to know that story because they are just beginning to face those questions that will continue to occupy them for the rest of their lives, namely, "Who am I, truly? How can I be my most authentic self? What was I meant to do in this world?"

But imagine a young person to whom the world says, "Who you think you are is sick. Who you know yourself to be is crazy. Following the path of your heart will bring you ostracism, pain and even violence. Hide your deepest truth, no matter how unhappy, inauthentic, and anxious that makes you feel.”

And suppose, in their church, that the sermons this young person hears, and the subtle and not-so-subtle social cues they encounter, combine to create a dark, inverted version of The Zusha Story, a counter-story whose moral teaches that being who you truly are will block your soul from encountering God when you die, and that, if you did face your Maker in The World to Come, God would say, "How dare you live your life as you did? You should have hidden, you should have been someone else, you should have disappeared?"

Now imagine that this young person is Jewish, like the author of the reminiscence you're about to hear, written by an Orthodox Jew from New York:

"As Tati and I walked down the quiet streets of Williamsburg, I thought about the afternoons I'd now have free, now that I wasn't obligated to attend a special after-school program for Talmud study. That's when Tati raised the topic of my Bar Mitzvah. "Now that you are closer to your Bar Mitzvah, it is not the time to waste your afternoons. You are about to become a young man, and you have to take religious study and divine worship even more seriously." He went on with his fatherly lecture, but I stopped listening, fixating on the words he had just said. Bar Mitzvah. Young man. His words landed like a bomb, and my ears thundered with noise. As we walked through the underpass under the BQE at Wythe Avenue and Williamsburg Street East, all I could take in was the sound of the cars above me. The cracks in the sidewalk asphalt under my feet seemed as though they were

going to swallow me, and my heart raced. I was a girl being raised as a boy, and I was going to have a Bar Mitzvah. Of course, this was not a surprise to me. Of course, I was going to have a Bar Mitzvah. The date had been chosen long ago, and a venue had been booked. Tati had even ordered *Tefillin* for me to wear—a set of small black leather boxes containing scrolls of parchment that were inscribed with verses from the Torah, to be worn on my forehead and on one arm during prayer after my Bar Mitzvah. But knowing and feeling are not the same. Now I felt it, and it felt terrible. I felt as if Tati had just told me I had a terminal illness. I could no longer hear his words, but I could hear his voice, and I needed it to stop. I spun around and glared at him. “I do not want to talk about this!” I shrieked. Tati had no idea what had befallen me. “Why are you screaming?” he asked. I didn’t answer; I stormed ahead, silent and fuming all the way. When we reached our house, I ran straight to my room, climbed into my bed with all my clothes on, and cried. My parents were bewildered. This was not my first outburst, and they were growing more and more concerned. They knew little kids had temper tantrums, and older children were prone to mood swings. My parents knew how to deal with them, just like they did with my siblings. But my outbursts were different. They were random, explosive, and seemingly unexplainable. My parents didn’t understand, but I did. Waves of anger and panic swept over me whenever I connected to the

idea that no one saw me as a girl, that no one saw me for me. It made me feel lost, and helpless.”

These words were written by Abby Stein, taken from her stunning memoir, *Becoming Eve: My Journey from Ultra Orthodox Rabbi to Transgender Woman*. I started reading it after Rosh Hashanah and haven’t been able to put it down. Her gift for taking you into her interior world is extraordinary, and I found myself repeatedly tearing up reading passages like the one I’ve shared with you.

Let me pause here to pose what may or may not be an obvious question. Out of all the topics I might have chosen to address in the final *Kol Nidrei* sermon at Congregation Beth Israel, why did I choose to use this opportunity to speak about the LGBTQ+ community, focusing on the challenges faced by trans youth in particular? There are several reasons.

For one thing, there are gay and trans people in my family, beautiful souls whom I love, and I want them to be happy, fulfilled, and safe.

That’s a lot of skin in the game right there, but these issues have become less theoretical and more personal to me in recent years for another reason. We have an ever-growing cohort of LGBTQ Jews within our congregation. This development makes me happy, not only because it speaks to the culture of welcoming and inclusivity that defines Congregation Beth Israel, but also because getting to know so many of our LGBTQ members has been such a blessing in my own life. Although

I know that the people in our LGBTQ community don't exist to teach me how to be more of a *mensh*, I *have* learned so much from you: lessons about listening, about the holiness of other people's life stories – their personal Torah – about suffering, joy and pride, and about the power of that listening to soften and open my heart.

And to this I would add something that many of you have heard me talk about before, specifically, the ever-growing number of LGBTQ students in our Living a Jewish Life class. Seeing our faith through the grateful, loving, and amazed eyes of our LGBTQ conversion students has helped to renew my own appreciation for what a gift it is to be Jewish.

All these things have been on my mind for quite some time, but the immediate reason for speaking to you about this tonight concerns a phone call I took three days ago. For reasons I'll explain shortly, I cannot tell you who was on the other end of the call, but I can share the substance and purpose of the conversation.

Trish Ivey, our Clergy Assistant, was contacted by a person who works for an organization in another city outside of Texas that serves the needs of many thousands of LGBTQ people of all ages, from children to elders, providing every imaginable kind of health and wellness support: physical and mental healthcare, including gender affirming care, nutrition, financial support, legal services, housing assistance and so on.

But this person hadn't made an appointment talk to some random Texas rabbi on a whim. You see, their organization, which never turns away an LGBTQ person in need, serves clients without regard to where they live, including many whose families travel a long way from out of state to obtain gender affirming care for their trans children. And because Texas law now forbids a parent from obtaining such medical care for their child, this organization is seeing a huge spike in the number of Texas families bringing their children for treatment.

My Dad, of blessed memory, used to say, "What won't you do for your kid," and any of us who have raised a child with any kind of special needs know that there's no limit to what you'll do to advocate for your kid at every turn, no matter what it costs or how far you have to drive or how many hours you have to spend on hold or how many faxes you have to send to the insurance company, or how many meetings you need to schedule with the school guidance counselor to get your kiddo what they need to thrive and have a shot at a life worth living.

And so it is for the parents of these trans kids, as these families drive or fly every three months to this clinic in a faraway city to get their child the doctor's appointment that their home state has declared illegal. So I was contacted because the clinic, well over a thousand miles from here, now serves more Texans than ever.

For this quarterly pilgrimage to an out-of-state doctor (for those kids fortunate enough to have supportive parents who can afford the trip, of course), we can thank SB 14, the Texas bill banning health care for transgender youth. In its final form the bill revokes medical licenses of any healthcare provider who prescribes the outlined care for “the purpose of transitioning a child’s sex.” It also prohibits any public funding to anyone who provides or “facilitates” this treatment. While there is no grandfather clause for those already receiving treatment, there is a directive to “wean off” a limited number of youth who met certain criteria before ever receiving care. The 88th session of the Texas Leg passed a number of other equally heinous and pointlessly cruel “culture war” bills targeting LGBTQ and non-Christian public-school students, but we don’t have that kind of time tonight. Consider this: Abby Stein had faced huge, painful challenges being a gender non-conforming kid in a Hasidic world where strictly defined, unbending gender roles touched everything from social status, to dress, to education, to marriage and family. But she didn’t face a secular government determined to define her and limit her choices in a cynical bid to enhance its political power.

Well, now you know why I can’t tell you who I spoke to on the phone a few days ago, or where they work. If I mentioned any of that information, the State of Texas could go after that foundation for providing forbidden care to Texans. It also explains why the person I spoke to and I have exchanged no emails or texts, and

why so many out-of-state families fortunate enough to have health insurance are reluctant to use their benefits at the clinic: any physical or electronic paper trail puts the family and the provider at risk.

It's all quite infuriating, especially because so many of the politicians and lobbyists behind this cruel mischief are the first to grandstand about keeping government out of our lives, at least when it comes to what kind of lightbulbs you can buy or whether average citizens should be able to buy semi-automatic weapons. But when it comes to what you do with your body or how you choose to raise your kid, there's no limit to governmental meddling.

As my rabbinical school professor Rabbi Leonard Kravitz used to say, "You couldn't make it up. It's too bad to make up."

It's also infuriating because, friends, this is about *our CBI kids*. When parents register their kids for Sunday School or Greene Family Camp and tell us that their kids' pronouns are "they/them," we respectfully use them. When our own, non-binary b'nei mitzvah students are called to the Torah, we offer them the use of the non-gender-specific Hebrew name formula that eschews the indicators "ben" (son of) or "bat" (daughter of), instead using the word *mi-bayt*, "from the home of," followed by the parents' names. We can make CBI a safe, loving and accepting place for all our kids in these ways, but that can't protect them from what's going on "out there."

So yes, these LGBTQ kids and adults are *ours*, and the question is, are we going to advocate for them, or sit by while they're targeted for political purposes? Are we going to help them be safe, happy and at home in this complicated world? I know how good and kind this community is, so I already know the answers to those questions, and I'm looking forward to sharing things you can do to be an ally and advocate for them in the days ahead.

Speaking of days to come, tomorrow afternoon, during our annual, Yom Kippur Current Events Discussion, we'll study some Jewish texts, and opinion pieces from across the Jewish ideological spectrum, on Judaism and trans Jews. I had struggled with whether to include this material in this talk but given time constraints and wanting us to dialog together, we'll look at some of it tomorrow afternoon. I hope many of you will take part.

Friends, we have three impressive banners in the traffic circle of our parking lot out there. They say, "joyful," "diverse," and "inclusive." And maybe one day we'll add one more banner that reads, "Ah... the Zusha story!" It will remind us that we are here to accompany each other on our journey to be express our own uniqueness, to fully manifest the most beautiful expression of the image of God in each of us, and to welcome all who would accompany us on this Jewish journey, without exception.

Amen, gut yuntif!