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Rosh Hashanah D'var by Sammy Sass – September 21st, 2017

Good morning. L'Shana Tova. I'm very moved to be here in front of you today. Thank you for inviting me to share something of what I'm reflecting on this High Holy Day season. We have had quite a year. And in thinking about what to share with you all today, I find that I need to talk about forgiveness.

Because our tradition mandates that we must practice teshuva together, in community, I'm going to start with something personal. I'm going to tell us a story.

I remember watching the 2004 election results come in, sitting in the den in the house I grew up in in Cambridge with my two moms. Gay marriage was on the ballot in a bunch of states that year, including in Ohio where my grandparents live. My family sat around the TV and dared each other to call up my grandparents and ask how they'd voted. I agreed to call them. "So, how did you vote?", I said. And my Nana responded, "I do not believe those people should get *married*." After I hung up the phone, we all said, "Woah" and we laughed. "Those people," said my mom, "who does she think she's talking to?" Not only that, I wondered, but who does she think her family is?

I interviewed my grandmother recently, as part of a project I'm writing about queer families. I asked her everything – I asked about my mom's coming out, about the configuration of our family, and about how she explained us to her friends. She answered all of my questions, and she told me some of her own opinions. She told me, "You know Sammy, I do believe all children should have a father." I asked her, "Nana, what am I lacking? What would I have had with a father that I don't already have?" She didn't answer for a long minute and then said, "No matter how good it was, it is twice as good with a father." And I wondered: What is the 'it'. Family? Life? *Me*?

You know, it sucks to hear her say this, and all the other homophobic garbage that I've heard her say throughout my life, and I did have to take a really long walk and breathe really deep breaths immediately after I turned off the recorder. I cried, a lot. But it wasn't a surprise. It's always been in the air. I've breathed it every time I've been inside that house, every time she came into mine, every time we spoke on the phone and she said, "How is your mom?" and she only ever meant one of them. What I'm saying is that hearing all this stuff out loud felt awful, but it didn't feel worse than when it was unspoken.

It was a year before I could listen to the tapes of our interview. It is painful to dive into the world my Nana has written for herself. She wanted a son-in-law, she wanted me to have a

biological father, she wanted so many things that would make her life feel normal and regular and how it was *supposed* to be. She is so *bothered*.

But this stuckness is where I find compassion. She is holding on so tightly to a fantasy, and no one else is holding on with her. She lives in that pain alone. When I left after our interview, I got to close the door and come home. Years ago, I got to hang up the phone and be at joyful peace with my family. I had to visit my grandmother's shame, and throughout my life acquiesce to it in her presence, but then I got to leave it. My grandmother, on the other hand, has to live there.

I want to take this example of my grandmother and broaden our scope. I want to talk about the political moment that we are living in right now. My grandmother's homophobia, which was at the end of the day obnoxious and hateful but relatively harmless, is on the surface patently different from the violence we are witnessing now as a society. But I want to delicately propose that more egregious forms of violence such as men marching with tiki torches in American streets, and the deportation of undocumented immigrants, and state sponsored murder of black and brown people, all have a common parallel with my grandmother's version of hate.

Violence against the body, against the spirit, and against a person's sense of worth – is fueled by fear. I believe this is true for my grandmother, in the same way that this is true for the versions of violence I just named. One of the things that underlies that fear is a sense that the hate is a necessary pillar around which to make meaning of one's life. People need purpose, we need to be of use, and hate makes people feel that they belong, and it helps them justify their own life choices. Hate is a powerfully unifying social force.

As horrifying as that is, paradoxically, understanding hatred in this way gives me hope. It gives me hope that under the right circumstances, people can change, and turn.

The novelist Starhawk writes, "There is room for you at our table, should you choose to join us." In this there is a deep hope that when an alternative – the bountiful, loving table – is presented, it can be *chosen*. In this there is also a promise, that should you choose to join us, we will witness and accept your teshuva. There will be room for you at the table, not in the prisons or on the streets or in the reformatories, but at the table, amongst us.

And this right here, this promise of acceptance once the teshuva occurs, seems to me to be the most difficult task. What if my grandmother does loosen her grip and become less hateful? How will I respond? Truthfully, how will I respond? I want to say that I will throw my arms around her, ready to forgive and move forward. But am I so wounded that I would not be able to hear her grief? Am I so stuck in my own defenses that I would not be able to love her in her turning?

I ask us all here today, what if the klansmen turned over their torches and wept, we have no obligation to forgive them, but would we go to hold them and witness them through their changing? What if the 18 year old with his finger poised over the button that drops bombs from the drone, were to walk away and ask forgiveness? What if the police officer put down her gun?

These would not be simple *moments*, these would be years of reawakening and turning and grieving and relearning. How scary, to loosen your grip on something you think is keeping you upright. How painful to have to feel regret and grief, instead of staying mired in the numbness of hatred and rage. To love someone through their turning, is an enormous task, are we able to do it?

My hope is that we stay open and ready and take these next ten days to practice turning.

My hope is that we put down our own self-protective fear and plead imperfection in front of the people we love.

My hope is that we let our lives be the terrain on which we practice this necessary, redemptive work.

My hope is that we are brave.

May our hearts be strong and courageous enough to hold both moral conviction, and compassion for the people we find most difficult to love.

L'Shana Tova. Happy new year. And a full heart of hope for a besere velt.