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“Who Shall Be Tormented”

Every congregational rabbi has two kinds of High Holydays services – the ones he or she leads, and the ones he or she attends. For this rabbi, the High Holydays I attend take place every time Los Angeles is visited by Bruce Springsteen and the legendary E Street Band.

For those who have never experienced it, a Bruce Springsteen show is more like a revival than a rock concert, and it has the added bonus of making any worship service you’ve ever attended at Leo Baeck Temple seem short. Springsteen plays for four hours – at the age of sixty-seven. I know of no rabbi who can do that. And his shows are nonstop thrill rides through the vicissitudes of the human condition. His performances are arrestingly intimate, which is quite an achievement considering the fact that they happen in front of tens of thousands of people. And his songs unleash the raw truths and emotions that any good preacher, Jewish or otherwise, seeks to access – love, loneliness, triumph, despair, faith, hope. Ask any of the other regulars at Springsteen’s shul like me, and they’ll tell you – he delivers one of the truly transcendent religious experiences that can be found anywhere.

As a person who has written songs for a living myself, and who still works at writing songs, I have often marveled at Springsteen’s astonishing gift. How, I have wondered, can he understand so much about what it is to be alive, and then capture it in five poetic, majestic, not-of-this world minutes... again and again and again? It is a talent that any of us would dearly love to have, and very few have ever had as he does.

Fifteen days ago, Springsteen released an autobiography that he had been working on for seven years. He had no ghost writer or collaborator, so every word was his own. And with a shocking degree of candor, he answers my question. How can he understand so much about what it is to be alive – and then capture it in five poetic, majestic, not-of-this-world minutes? He does it because he is more than just a super-talented composer; he is a painfully tormented soul with a family history of mental illness.

His best friend in the E Street Band, Steve Van Zandt, describes Springsteen in his teenage years as “shut down and closed in.” Said Van Zandt, “People were always wondering ‘Why are you hanging out with him? He’s such a weirdo.’ Some people thought he was mental.”

Describing his family's life in the small town of Freehold, New Jersey, Springsteen writes: "The bride and her hero are whisked away in their long black limousine, the one that drops you off at the beginning of your life. The other one is just around the corner waiting for another day to bring the tears and take you on that short drive straight out Throckmorton Street to the St. Rose graveyard on the edge of town." Sounds like a very eloquent rabbi describing what this Yom Kippur day is supposed to elicit in us – an awareness of our mortality and the urgency to make meaning of that short span of time between the two limousine rides.

So maybe Springsteen isn't such a weirdo after all. Maybe his lifelong brush with brain illness has just unleashed his genius, causing him to see human existence more intensely and more honestly, with all of its euphoric highs, but also with the dark and frightening lows that find each one of us when we are most vulnerable to them. He seems somehow to hold all of that at once, to be all of that at once, which is at once wise and rather scary. Says Springsteen, "...whoever you've been and wherever you've been, it never leaves you. I always picture it as a car. All your selves are in it. And a new self can get in, but the old selves can't ever get out. The important thing is, who's got their hands on the wheel at any given moment?"

It's obvious by now that Springsteen is a real hero of mine – someone with an otherworldly capacity to describe what humans feel and assign it meaning. So I must admit that it was heartbreaking to me to learn how deeply he has suffered in his life and in his mind. His father Doug bequeathed to him a long family history of undiagnosed and never-to-be-discussed mental illnesses – agoraphobia, hair-pulling disorders, aunts who literally howled indiscriminately. His dad couldn't outrun the demons, dropping out of high school – as would Bruce a generation later – drifting from job to job, a mostly angry loner who drank too much. And so, beset with paranoia and too many tears, all Doug had left for his son Bruce was an unpredictable mixture of cool detachment and raging disapproval. He literally never once summoned the words "I love you" for his son.

Bruce has sought to break the cycle through proper diagnosis and treatment – but chronic illness is chronic illness, so it's an endless challenge. He suffers from clinical depression and an ever mounting fear that he is doomed to become his father. "You don't know the illness's parameters," he writes. "Can I get sick enough to where I become a lot more like my father than I thought I might?"

Springsteen at sixty-seven is now one of the most prolific and renowned songwriters of all time – but that has happened amid his illness, not beyond it. He writes: "I was crushed between (the ages of) sixty and sixty-two, good for a year and out again from sixty-three to sixty-four." And what does this look like to his wife Patti, who is both his true love and a member of the E Street Band? Writes Springsteen: "Patti will observe a freight train bearing down, loaded with nitroglycerin and running quickly out of track."

I know and love the incredible music that Springsteen was writing between sixty and sixty-two, and sixty-three and sixty-four. So I have seen with my own eyes and heard with my own ears just how much inspired living can take place while navigating the treachery of mental illness. But as this congregation's rabbi, I have also seen with my own eyes and heard with my own ears just how much devastation can be wrought by mental illness.

Many of you already know that it's been a tough year or so for our congregation on this front. In greater measure than I can ever remember before, we have lost loved ones before their time. Sometimes, it has been accidental, but sometimes not. In the space of just seven months, two beloved members of this congregation – loving husbands and fathers, both of whom were leaders and exemplars in our temple community – took their own lives, leaving their families stunned and heartsick, and leaving our congregation wounded and afraid. How was it possible that things had become that desperate for these incredible men, whom we knew so well, but obviously not as well as we thought?

Suddenly, we could feel a freight train bearing down and running out of track. And so we held a gathering to talk about ways that our congregation could respond, to explore the types of programming and support that we could offer, not just to these grieving families but to all our families. A lot of familiar faces filled that room. Active LBT congregants, one and all. Everyone knew at least a few of the others who were there. I, of course, knew everyone there. We opened the meeting by going around the room and inviting each person to tell us why they came. And one by one by one, stories of heartbreaking mental illness poured out... from people who had never told them before, at least not at their temple.

One man talked about standing at the grave with our community in the aftermath of one of those awful suicides and resolving that he was going to tell his own story of life-threatening bipolar disorder out loud, both to seek support and to give it... because what he saw at the grave that day was not going to become his story.

One woman told us about an eighteen-month period when she was so paralyzed by depression that she could not get out of bed. She was on Wellutrin, Prozac, Adavan and Lithium at the same time – just to find the right cocktail to break the debilitating cycle of depression. She was on the board of a different local temple at the time. Nobody knew how sick she was. She felt so ashamed to be so out of control that she asked her then-rabbi not to discuss it with anyone. So she just disappeared for a few years – and the community silently obliged her disappearance.

One man – a man I had known since the rabbinic search that brought me here more than fourteen years ago – spoke of the suicide of his brother, who ultimately lost his life in his battle against mental illness. I knew him for more than fourteen years, and I had never heard this story.

One woman described her suffering when she first learned of her son's diagnosis with schizophrenia. She was so despondent, so grief stricken, so devastated, and felt so stigmatized that she fled any spiritual or Jewish community at all. It was years before she was ready to rejoin the Jewish community by joining LBT. So she was alone in her pain, hiding her shame, and only after years could she find a safe place to share her agony, start to heal, and find the courage to speak publicly about her family's ordeal.

One man told of his family heredity with clinical depression – how it had decimated generations and left him with a broken bond with his own father... and also a harrowing feeling of impending doom whenever his own depression kicks into high gear.

One woman told of the death decades earlier of her first husband, a gifted physician, who therefore had plenty of easy access and deep knowledge of prescription medications. He proceeded into the darkness of his own suffering, and died from his prescription drug use at the age of thirty-eight, leaving behind his wife and two young sons, aged ten and eight.

I could go on – because our group went on. And on. A tragic array of agonizing tales of illness, almost never shared before that night. I myself knew only a few of these stories, even though I knew well each person who told them. Or so I had thought. How could this be?

It could be because we have built a society in which there is one set of rules for how we treat people who are suffering from illnesses situated in their heart, or their lungs, or their prostate, or most any other bodily organ, and a different set of rules for how we treat people whose illnesses are situated in their brain. We know, of course, that the brain is just another bodily organ that can betray us in a million ways, just like every other part of our bodies. But when it's the brain that malfunctions, we humans can be pretty inhuman with one another.

What's interesting is that this is not actually an inherent human tendency – to stigmatize those who suffer from brain illness, to blame the victim and call him or her names like “weak” or “crazy,” to judge his or her family members as failures. Apparently, we made this heartlessness up ourselves. How do I know that? Because just look at the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer that Cantor Kates chanted for us this morning. It's arguably our tradition's most foreboding piece of liturgy, the one that speaks of this Yom Kippur day as the moment when our fates for the year are sealed. Who shall live and who shall die. Who by fire and who by water. Who by war. Who by famine. Who by earthquake. It's horribly unsettling to us to think that life might work that way – even theologically repellant to us. But read on in the prayer, and you discover that it's not just some litany of ways that we are fated to die. The list also includes “*Mi yashkit, u'mi y'toraf*” – “Who will know inner quiet (in this new year), and who will be torn by inner discord”... and “*Mi yishalev, umi yit'yaser*” – “Who will be serene, and who will be tormented.”

So while we, as a society, may think of brain illness as something worthy of secrecy or shame or judgment, it's pretty clear that our ancient rabbis didn't see it that way. To them, mental illness “made the list” of ultimate concerns that we should be thinking about on this day – and therefore on every day.

And let me assure you, those ancient rabbis were right, because our neglect, our cruelty, toward those who are tormented is producing some dire realities. Nearly one out of every four of us is personally affected by mental illness or addiction every day. One out of every three hospitalizations in the U.S. involves mental illness or addiction. And throughout the world, the leading cause of death among fifteen to nineteen-year-olds is suicide... not starvation, not AIDS, not some other awful plague. Just the plague of the mind. And here in the U.S., suicide is on the rise among all age groups, but particularly among ten to fourteen-year-old girls, who are now taking their own lives at three times the rate they did just fifteen years ago.

We have a full-fledged national health crisis on our hands, but it's a quiet crisis, because mental illness is the quiet disease... the one we don't talk about. Which is why many mental illnesses end up undiagnosed until they are already very late in their course, and also why half of those diagnosed with a mental illness receive no treatment at all. Can you imagine us tolerating such a thing with any other type of illness? People walking around with cancer or heart disease and receiving no medical help at all?

For mental illness, though, the rules are different – and if we're being honest, we're a part of that difference, even those of us who bemoan it, because we're a part of society. We can't help but be shaped by it. Bestselling author Stephen Fried has made a cause célèbre of this issue in recent years, most prominently with a book he wrote jointly with former congressman Patrick Kennedy, who himself suffers from mental illness. In a recent article he penned for the Jewish Forward, Fried raised a question we all ought to consider carefully. As he discussed the familiar Mi Sheberach prayer for healing that Jews all over the world recite – a prayer where we are often invited to speak aloud the names of those who are suffering from illness – Fried points out that if he were to speak the name of a friend who was battling breast cancer, and then someone were to approach him at the end of services and ask him about that person's story, he would without hesitation tell the truth. But if the person he wanted to name was depressed or manic, he "might consider it a personal betrayal — or at least a HIPAA violation — (even) to mention the person's name aloud (at all)," much less to describe his or her diagnosis. And this is the guy who literally wrote the book on destigmatizing mental illness. If he would hesitate, we would definitely hesitate.

Fried's childhood rabbi, Jeffrey Wohlberg, described the phenomenon this way: "We don't always know how to handle people who are different. For me this goes back to being a kid in synagogue after the war and being told not to stare at someone who was missing a limb. Somehow, 'not staring' turns into not even being able to look."

Leo Baeck Temple cannot be a place where, in the name of not staring, we will choose not even to look at those suffering right next to us. For the tormented are not just occupying our hearts or consciousness. They are occupying this room. They are sitting here, right next to you. And many of you can be counted among them.

So we will look. And we will see. And we will care. And not just because it's kind and decent. We'll do it because the clinical evidence suggests that we, as a congregation, actually have an important role to play in the successful treatment of illnesses of the mind. Writes Fried, "Medical science has taught us that mental illness is best treated by an integrated model of care, or the 'bio-psycho-social-spiritual' approach. In other words, patients benefit from remedies that combine medication, behavioral therapy, the aid of friends and family, and the support of a religious community." So we're not just talking about being humane here. We're talking about the mitzvah of *bikur cholim* – our religious obligation to care for the sick... and the mitzvah of *pikuach nefesh* – our religious obligation to save lives whenever we can. And lest you think that Jewish law is mostly hung up on what things you don't do on the Sabbath, or what foods you don't eat, or even what days you shouldn't eat... all of it is to be set aside whenever doing so can save a life, because that's where our tradition places its priority.

And therefore, that's where LBT is going to place its priority. This temple will no longer be a place where a person can disappear into mental illness with the silent acquiescence of the community. The group that shared

all those stories with one another that night is now launching the work of *Tikkun Hanefesh* here at Leo Baeck. You may have heard the term *tikkun olam* before – the repairing of the world. *Tikkun Hanefesh* is the repairing of our souls, and we cannot rightly claim to be serious about fixing a broken world if we won't get serious about fixing *all* the broken worlds that exist right here in this congregation.

Our first collective step in this mission was actually a whole lot of steps. On the day before Rosh Hashanah, twenty-five Leo Baeckers – including one of the widows whose husband I mentioned earlier – participated in the NAMI Walk to raise awareness and sensitivity. NAMI is the National Alliance on Mental Illness, the largest grassroots mental health organization in America. But this is just the beginning of our bringing this matter out into the open where it belongs. Be on the lookout for *Tikkun Hanefesh* offerings within our community – both those specifically addressing mental health and creating a stigma-free embrace for those within its grips, and those dealing more generally with the massive pressures that teens, parents, seniors, singles... all of us... face and get consumed by. At LBT, this will be a quiet crisis no more. In fact, we'll begin breaking the silence right after this service, as our Yom Kippur Afternoon Study Session will be led by our own Rabbi Dr. Tamara Eskenazi – my teacher, an internationally renowned Jewish scholar, and the fellow Leo Baeck Temple congregant who has been the skillful and sensitive convener of our *Tikkun Hanefesh* initiative. I urge you – whether you already know this issue touches your life deeply or you just haven't come around yet to that realization – stay with us for an extra hour or so today. Study our Jewish tradition's wisdom about what torments us. Be brave enough to stare this monster in the eye with us, and discover that you are not alone. Help others discover that they are not alone. Stay – and help us break the silence. Help us begin walking together toward fixing all these broken worlds of ours.

You see, our tradition loves us *because* we're broken. Back in the Torah, the Israelites carried the broken pieces of the shattered commandments with them into the Promised Land, right there along with the new, pristine ones. And why? Because the broken pieces are *us*. There's no reason to be ashamed of that. It's who we are. And if we grownups don't want to accept that or are afraid of it, maybe we can learn a lesson or two from our kids. This past August, when I was on faculty at Camp Alonim, where so many of our temple kids spend their summers, the tenth-graders sang a song loudly and proudly that was written just for them by their music leaders. And whenever the chorus rolled around, that's when they sang twice as loud: "We're all a little broken. That's what makes us whole."

Doing this isn't going to be easy. We're going to touch vulnerable spots in ourselves and others. And even when we do our very best, we still won't be able to save everyone – for just like cancer or heart disease or other ailments, sometimes, we do all the right things, and the illness still proves impenetrable. But let there be no doubt – no one should ever have to walk that road alone, embarrassed, ashamed, judged. Not if they're a part of this community. For we're all a little broken. That's what makes us whole.

Bruce Springsteen worries every day about whether he's going to turn into his father – and we are incredulous, because we can see the differences between the two men, plain as day. We can see that when we treat this

illness as illness, transcendence is possible. Our genius as humans is let out. No, we can't be Springsteen. But neither can he be us.

You know the prophet Elijah – the guy you summon every year at seder? This year, when you open the door for him, try thinking of him as the Bible tells us he was. Think of him as a clinically depressed soul who once begged God to take his life... but somehow survived and became the foretaste of the Messiah. Imagine that. Even bigger than Springsteen.

Who will know inner quiet in this new year – and who will be tormented? The answers are not sealed on this day – because we are here, asking the questions. Let every day of this new year 5777 be our shared journey in creating the answers.