

## **Save a Life, Save the World**

Parshat *Sh'mot* – TNT – January 21, 2017

Rabbi Jaclyn Cohen

Once upon a time in a land far away – Los Angeles – there was a precocious and spirited girl ... who spent her Labor Day doing somersaults into the community pool. The air was warm, the opportunity to do something a little dangerous was fresh and that girl had a *blast* tossing herself carelessly into a pool filled with people.

After about an hour of throwing herself headfirst into the cool blue water ... that girl ... suddenly heard a loud “crack” and everything got fuzzy. When she emerged from the water to come up for air, her head felt a little weird. She noticed adults edging closer to the side of the pool and the next thing she knew, there was one towel wrapped around her body and another atop her head – which, she started to realize, was growing red with blood.

The next thing the girl remembered she was in an emergency room at Santa Monica Hospital. A bright light shined on her as a kind doctor and gentle nurses tended to her cracked skull, smacked on the side of the pool during one of her somersault attempts. The room was large and sterile; the doctor hummed a tune the girl didn't recognize as he worked.

After about an hour, the girl was free to go; dark blue stitches closed up the fresh wound. She would be fine.

And so she went on with her life – starting kindergarten the following day, pleased as punch to tell the boys on the playground how *tough* she really was.

(pause)

That girl was, of course, me; the forceful somersault incident occurred in 1989, when I was five years old. I'm not quite sure what my parents were thinking as they watched me hurl myself into a pool of water, but we've *all* learned lessons since those early years of my childhood.

When I cracked my head open that afternoon at the community pool, my parents did what most parents would: they took care of me. They put me in the car and drove straight to the hospital. And though I didn't recognize it at the time, whatever health insurance we had back then covered the procedure I needed. Had, God forbid, our insurance not covered it; my parents would have found a way to pay for the procedure out of pocket.

I was lucky. Fortunate. Privileged.

This was, thankfully, my one and only experience as a hospital patient up until I delivered our son. And so it stayed in my mind – for a long time – as *thee* primary example of modern American healthcare. If you're a healthy person, something happens, you go to the hospital and they fix you, and then you're fine.

(pause)

Well, I've grown up a bit, and through that maturing process I've watched family members and friends suffer through illness and death. I've watched acquaintances and congregants struggle with mysterious diseases. I've witnessed the failures of modern medicine and the complex labyrinth of insurance companies first hand. And I've learned – through time and circumstance – just how deep the wounds of modern American healthcare can go.

This week, in anticipation of Inauguration Day, the Affordable Care Act – also known as Obamacare – came under serious fire by an enlivened, emboldened right. Now, whether you agree with the principles or details of the ACA, signed into law by President Obama in 2010, I argue that its original intention was a very, *very* Jewish one. Our Talmud teaches, "If you save a life, it is as if you have saved the entire world." It isn't a fringe notion within Judaism; it's our main currency – the priority of life over all else.

Our history of suffering at the hands of greater powers defines who we are; our preservation of life is the greatest, most triumphant response our ancestors could possibly envision, protect, or enact.

Access to healthcare, doctors, hospitals, research, treatments, and *choice* isn't some obscure concept – it's the *foundation* of our Jewishness. But ***access*** rests upon one's ability to ***afford*** these very things. Without access to affordable health insurance ... the very idea of "health" becomes synonymous with entitlement and privilege. Without affordable health insurance ... people suffer ... they die ... and that, my friends, goes completely against our core Jewish values.

Now, no policy is ever perfect. There are legitimate and substantial questions the ACA continues to pose about cost and responsibility. I'm not the person to answer those questions: I'm not a policy maker, and I'm no politician. But at the core of the ACA is a non-negotiable truth: that we American citizens have a constitutional right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness ... and one simply cannot achieve those fundamental rights when their most basic, primary needs ... are forgotten.

(pause)

Now, I grew up the daughter of a doctor. My father is a brilliant physician who devotes his life to a rare type of medicine – one seldom chosen by today's graduating medical students as they seek out residency for the duration of their careers.

My father's hero – his medical inspiration – was a television character from the early 70s; indeed, my father's email address and social media handle, established at the dawn of the Internet, were chosen in deference to him. That hero was Marcus Welby MD, the family doc with a gentle bedside manner on a first-name basis with many of his patients. Because of Marcus Welby my father chose family medicine as the direction of his medical career. He believed ... that he could make the greatest impact not in episodic moments of crisis but through long-term care and the enduring relationship between doctor and patient.

A recent New Yorker article referred to this as, "the heroism of incremental care," proving beautifully the tremendous value and significance of medicine that does not have the urgency, flashiness or frankly the paycheck of surgery or dermatology. Family medicine, internal medicine – these are branches of healthcare that require patience, thoughtfulness, and an ability to see a bigger picture – the whole picture – of an individual or family's collective health and well-being over decades.

Incremental care is like insurance – a long-term investment, a long-range plan, which recognizes you need continued and sustained commitment over time to prevent in every way possible the problems presented by the urgent and immediate. The New Yorker article reads, "incrementalists want us to accept that they will never be able to fully anticipate or prevent all problems. This makes [their work] a hard sell. Their contribution is more cryptic, and also more ambitious. They are claiming, in essence, to be able to predict and shape the future." (*The Heroism of Incremental Care*, Atul Gawande, The New Yorker; January 23, 2017)

Convincing Americans to invest time, energy and money into *incremental* over *episodic* healthcare isn't the only hard sell. It's grown to be equally challenging to convince many Americans – we who so often see ourselves as invincible – that we need to take care of ourselves from morning 'til night, cradle 'til grave ... that we must invest in our collective health and ensure a brighter, healthier future ... and that we must protect one another from illnesses eradicated by medical and scientific trailblazers not ... all that long ago.

(pause)

In this week's Torah portion a new pharaoh ascends the throne in Egypt. Weakened and intimidated by an increasing number of Hebrews in his kingdom, he "deals shrewdly with them," entering them into a system of slavery. He then decrees every newborn Hebrew male must be drowned in the Nile.

And then we meet the midwives.

Shifrah and Puah are the birth doulas; it's unclear if they are Hebrew or Egyptian. They defy Pharaoh's decree, saving the lives of Hebrew babies, citing their fear of God as cause. When Pharaoh asks them, *why are you saving the lives of these Hebrews*, the women respond that Hebrew women are just too vigorous; too strong.

But God knows that's not the truth – God knows that THEY know they have a moral obligation to preserve life over all else, and that's why we read in the text, “*God dealt well with the midwives – and the people multiplied and increased greatly.*”

Shifrah and Puah aren't just strong, defiant women – they're the first named and identified health workers in the Torah. They know ... that there's a cost to caring for human lives ... in their case, there's a cost to defying a tyrannical ruler. But they do what is right in the face of obstacles and challenges. They do what is right because they are bound to a moral code, whether they be Hebrews or not. And they do what is right not knowing the long-term impact of their actions.

Their life-saving intervention eventually leads to the saving of Moses' life, which leads to the saving of our collective life as a people. Our Exodus story ... our redemption ... rests on these two intrepid souls ... and their long-term strategy (intentional or not) to care for the collective health of the Jewish people.

(pause)

Yesterday, as every one of us knows, our nation entered a new chapter in its enduring story. Like our Torah, the narrative of our great country has taken many twists and turns, hit peaks and valleys, and will push and challenge us in ways we have not been challenged or pushed in years.

What I hope and pray every single one of us asks ourselves today, and tomorrow, and every day that follows ... is not, simply, “how will we fight back when the fight presents itself?” Or, “how will we fight each fire individually – from the ACA to protecting gay marriage to CHOICE and so much more?”

Rather, today I push every one of us to ask how will we look to our future as a sustained, lifelong fight for justice and equality? How will we approach each day as committed incrementalists, sustaining the physical, spiritual and moral health of our entire country NOT just for a certain period of time, but for LIFE? How will we fight to protect the fundamental rights of ALL American citizens ... not just for the next four or eight years ... not just when the crises announce themselves in our inboxes ... not just when we witness a press conference and shudder with fear ... and, especially not just around the issues and concerns that immediately affect us?

How will we turn this fight for justice into a lifelong pursuit?

I don't have all the solutions ... nor do I have proposals for how to fix the problems surely facing us in the years to come. But I do have determination ... and *chutzpah*, and as we move forward into this new chapter I say *chazak v'amatz*: let us be strong and of good courage ... for the LONG haul.

Let us be brave enough to question our assumptions and fight for what our tradition teaches us is right and just.

Let us allow our faith to guide us toward morality, compassion and endurance... for the moral health of our entire nation is at stake.

Let us look to Shifrah and Puah – to their brave act of resistance – and let it inspire our own determination to take on greater powers of oppression every single day of our lives.

And let us remember ... no matter who we are, what we believe, or how we vote ... to let the Talmud teaching ring in our hearts and minds for the rest of our time on this earth: “whomever has saved a life, it is as if he has saved the entire world.”

Friends, it's time to save the world.

Shabbat Shalom.