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Risks That are Worth It:

Learning to Be a Better Self

During this past shabbat, which was also Passover, my wife and I had our aufruf, a blessing before the torah and the congregation for a couple about to be married. Technically, at least in some states, Julia and I are already married. We were married by a judge in Washington D.C. in front of about thirty family members and a few friends. But this June will be our religious marriage, our big in front of 200 family and friends and God wedding. Since this visit will be our last trip to Boca before the 'big day' it was the perfect opportunity to have a aufruf here in our home community.

Aside from the obvious emotion of a life cycle event, there was more to this blessing: It was B'nai Torah's first same sex aufruf.

A few months ago, I had emailed the rabbi to ask if he was open to the idea. I told him that i knew it might be a risk for him politically within the congregation, but asked that he give it some thought. He wrote back almost immediately and enthusiastically said he would be honored. It might be a risk he said but he would take that risk.

At services on Saturday, there were some whispers and a few stares, but there were at least an equal number of mazal tovs. For me, the person who had been so angry with Judaism, so angry especially with the Conservative Movement of Judaism, the aufruf was a moment of liberation.

I've been searching for that moment of being free from my own anger towards Judaism. It's funny how that anger didn't go away even on entering rabbinical school. Turns out like your wallet and your cell phone you take you with you wherever you go. That moment was a kind of fusion of the major intersections of my life: family, Jewish practice, and moral activism. I couldn't be freed from my anger without all three. because that's how this journey started in the first place.

As a senior at Saint Andrews, I went on the March of the Living. Maybe a few of you are going this year. For those who may not know, it's an experience for Jewish juniors and seniors to visit the World War II death camps in Poland and then to visit Israel.

I remember walking through Majdonek, a camp left almost exactly as it stood during the war. Unlike Auschwitz, where the shoes of the murdered are behind glass, at Majdonek they are behind chicken wire. You can touch them - you can, if you let yourself, imagine the mothers, the fathers, the children who wore them. There is still ash in the crematorium ovens and when you walk by them, you walk by death.

Just outside the crematorium, there is a rose garden. A nice gesture you might think, a way to bring life to a dead place. Or maybe it's an insult to the lives taken before their times - lives that never got to grow. Just over a little hill, there are homes. You can see their windows from the door of the crematorium. People lived there during the war: they saw the evil and the smelled the smell of burning hair and burning bodies in the very air they breathed. Maybe it's the kind of thing you get used to, but I hope not.

A trip like that is a risk. You sign up knowing, hoping it will change you, but you don't know how you will change. All you know is you're putting yourself out there, making yourself vulnerable, hoping to be a better person in the end.

Returning from that trip, I began keeping kosher and after my first year at Washington University in St. Louis, I began observing Shabbat. The March of the Living trip cultivated my latent Jewish and moral activist identities all wrapped up and intertwined together.

During college, I spent my time learning and teaching about the intersection of oppressions, leading Jewish events, founding various student groups and encouraging the university to hire student life staff dedicated to LGBTQ related issues.

I've heard the hippie generation say things like, "I took a lot of risks in college." They smile sideways and shake their heads nostalgically. I can say I took a lot of risks in college, too. But not that kind. Institutionally, I was the first to begin the Masters in NonProfit Management program as an undergrad, I was the first to train university staff in a Safe Zones program, I was

among those who lobbied the administration to pay campus janitors a living wage. I'm proud of the mark I left on the institution.

Personally, I took other kinds of risks: I came out to my family. And I learned to take risks with kindness.

I was driving home from a movie late on a Thursday night - to my right was a dark park, and I saw a darker shape on the ground. I turned my car around and pulled onto the opposite side of the street. I couldn't completely make him out, but as I walked closer I saw a man whose head was bleeding. He was conscious, but not so lucid, and said that a car had clipped the back wheel of his bike.

It was clear that in racially segregated St. Louis, the drivers who had passed were afraid to help a black man on the side of the road. We called his wife - he wouldn't let me take him to the hospital because he thought his wife would worry. She arrived not too long after and took him to the nearest ER.

The next day I received a call from his sister thanking me. She told me he was resting, and doing okay. Another time, a different me might not have stopped - after all, it was not my business and it wasn't safe. I learned that practicing kindness is not always safe.

During college, I was learning to practice greater kindness and deeper Judaism, learning to make myself a better self. It was clear to me and those around me that I was on my way to rabbinical school. And during my senior year, when I had written all of my essays and my letters of recommendation had already been submitted, I withdrew my applications. The Conservative Movement rabbinical schools would not yet accept openly gay and lesbian students - and I would not begin a career of moral practice with a lie. I risked my future because of moral compulsion. What would I do now? Without this planned career path? Without my Jewish community?

And I was so angry. Angry at the establishment taking so long to decide to admit gay and lesbian students. To me it was something so obvious. A barrier that was turning young people away from Judaism. And something that frankly was happening anyway.

So I left for a while. I ate bacon again, which I had sorely missed, I went to Maine and

ate lobster. I got my Friday nights back - I went out with friends to parties and movies and other events. At the time, I thought I was liberated.

But for my anger. I carried it with me even though I tried to get rid of it. I tried politics, working at the intersection of faith and LGBT equality. I tried directly writing letters to the law making body of the conservative movement, I tried Jewish purification rituals, I tried rugby, yoga and acupuncture - and while these things helped in their various ways, none of them freed me.

Even though the Conservative movement now admits openly gay and lesbian students, at least in the American schools, and I now attend the Ziegler School for Rabbinic Studies, I couldn't let go of my anger - though I continued to seek ways to become a better me.

In January, I went to Berlin with other rabbinical students on a trip sponsored largely by the German government. We met with Jewish Germans, non-Jewish Germans, theological students, and others, but the most important meeting was an informal dinner with Humboldt University students. Oliver was one of the Humboldt students sitting at my table, and until the end of dinner he didn't say much, except for 'oh my english is not so good.'

When we were leaving, I told him his English is much better than he thinks it is. And I wouldn't say so if it weren't true.

As he paid his bar tab, Oliver told me he had never met Jews before.

"Well," I said, "what do you think?"

"It's strange," he paused. "My grandfather - he was S.S. He worked in the death camps."

I suppose I should have been more stunned, shocked,speechless, uncomfortable, but I was instead curious. "Did your grandfather tell you that?"

"No."

"Did your parents tell you?"

"No."

"How did you find out?"

"I opened a drawer and there was a picture of my grandfather – in uniform."

"How did you feel?"

"I was shocked." He said

We reached the last shared street corner on our walk out of the restaurant, and we stopped. Clearly, we needed more conversation, each of us from the other, if only to know what it was that we sought from one another. I suggested we get coffee later in the week. He must have liked the idea because before I could email him to set up a meeting, he emailed me.

And so Friday morning, Olli and I met at a train station and walked to a nearby café. Neither of us had intended to talk for more than an hour and a half at most, so when he checked his watch four hours later, each of us was surprised.

We talked about American politics, German politics, and finally about his family. "Do you think," he asked, "that we are responsible for the actions of our ancestors?" He looked down at his third coffee as he asked.

The responsibility of both asking and answering the question was palpable. Was I, a Jew with no known familial ties to the Holocaust, to speak for all Jews? Was I being asked for absolution? For a reprieve from the certain weight of his uniformed grandfather sitting on his shoulders?

I don't know that there's any right answer to that question, but in that moment I told Olli this: "I don't think so. But I think we are responsible for the memory of their actions, and for breaking the cycle."

For both Oliver and I, meeting and talking for this long about something so personal, so upsetting was a risk. He had never before met a Jew, and I had never before met someone open to sharing his family's dark past. We were both vulnerable to each word the other said, but our risk built a relationship across a painful chasm that would otherwise have never been crossed.

Even though I was working to become a better person, my anger still didn't go away. It didn't go away until this weekend. Until I returned to the place I started, the community in which I became a bat mitzvah, in an aufruf both Jewish and rooted in moral activism, before family and community, with the person I love and will marry (again).

It turns out what is liberating is not getting far away from your past, but the security of being where you started and knowing that you set out to change yourself, that you took the risks that you knew were good for you. My risks have made me a kinder and more vulnerable person - a person more ready to learn from and give to others and communities. There's always more self-evaluation, more potential for improvement, but it's equally as important to pause and share your journey with other risk-takers.

If you take anything from my speaking with you today, take this: becoming a better person whether for your own well-being or for the sake of your community requires taking risks. It requires being uncomfortable, being vulnerable. It is hard work, but the payoff, the payoff is always worth it. You may not know when it will come, but someday because of your hard work, you may save a life, you may build bridges across chasms as wide as the Holocaust, and you might even heal yourself.